

3/29/26 – Palm Sunday The Mountain of Illumination *Matthew 17:1-9*
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Have you ever had a “mountaintop moment” — an experience where you felt especially close to God or deeply inspired in your faith? If you have had an experience like that, where were you? Were you alone or with other people? Who was with you? What made that moment meaningful? I’ve been blessed to have moments like this — with Jill, and with friends from BBC on some of our pilgrimage and mission trips.

We all need mountaintop moments where God shows us, or reminds us, who Jesus truly is. Mountaintop experiences — experiences that touch you, change you, that are burned into your heart, soul, and memory — are moments you remember for the rest of your life. **The Mount of Transfiguration** that we’ll hear about today was such a moment for Peter, James, and John. **Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem** — on what we call Palm Sunday — was such a moment for the disciples and for those who had been traveling with and spending time with Jesus, on his journey to Jerusalem. Both the Transfiguration of Jesus and the Palm Sunday entrance illuminate who Jesus is, **but there’s a significant difference in who speaks and who they say Jesus is** on the Mountain of Transfiguration and when Jesus enters Jerusalem. We’ll get to that at the end.

The Gospel passage we’re about to hear begins, “*Six days later*”, so it’s helpful to know what happened six days before. The answer is, Jesus had described his upcoming suffering and death in Jerusalem. ***Matthew 16:21*** says, “*Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*” It’s six days after Jesus told them this that our scripture occurs.

Matthew 17:1-9, “Six days later, **Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.** And he was **transfigured** before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them **Moses and Elijah**, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘*Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*’ While he

was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ***‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’*** When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and **were overcome by fear**. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ***‘Get up and do not be afraid.’*** And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, ***‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’***”

Have you heard of **The Social Slope Effect**? There’s scientific evidence that your relationships impact the way you perceive challenges. Researchers at the University of Virginia found that people perceived a hill as being less steep if they were standing at the base with a friend (versus alone). They perceived it as being even less steep if it was a close friend (versus a newer one).

The researchers concluded that the brain treats supportive relationships as a psychological energy resource. When you feel connected, your brain effectively lightens the load. The challenge doesn’t change, but the perception of that challenge does.¹

Put simply, if you want to go far, go together – because challenges and struggles are inevitable, but facing them alone is optional. As Jesus neared the time of the greatest trial of his life, he didn’t want to face it alone. Six days after announcing his coming death, Jesus is on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem. He takes with him his inner circle of friends – Peter, James, and John – and they go on a hike, up a high mountain.

Whenever Jesus takes these three men aside, you know something special is going to happen. This is the second time Jesus brings only these three with him. The first time is in *Mark 5:37*, when Jesus goes to the home of Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, and brings his daughter – who has died – back to life. The third time we’ll hear about on Thursday evening. In today’s passage, they would’ve been tired, hungry, and thirsty by the end of their climb. On the mountain, Jesus is changed before their eyes – his clothes became a dazzling white. Peter, James, and John see two other figures with Jesus. **Moses**, the giver of the law, who also had experiences with God on a mountain that transformed his appearance, and **Elijah**, one of the greatest prophets,

¹ Study, "Social Support and the Perception of Geographical Slant," published in 2008 by researchers Simone Schnall, Dennis Proffitt, et al.

who had experiences with God on mountains, too. It was believed that Elijah was to come before the Messiah. Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus. The disciples are amazed and terrified. Peter blurts out the first thing that comes to his mind – basically, “Wow, Jesus, it’s great to be here – how about if we build shelters for you, Moses, and Elijah?” Mark’s version of this story states that Peter “*did not know what to say.*” It was a transcendent experience for which words were inadequate.

For people who grew up Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, or Roman Catholic, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday is known as Transfiguration Sunday, and this story is the Gospel reading. Some of us may not be familiar with the term Transfiguration. A young person might say, “Do you mean Transformer? I know what a Transformer is – they’re like heroes who can transform from a robot into other shapes, like a car, truck, or plane.” The Transfiguration of Jesus has many of the elements of the story of a hero. There’s an arduous trek up a mountain; a tightly knit company of friends on a “mission” together; the appearance of other-worldly figures in dazzling light; the transformation of the hero into an equally dazzling figure; a command from a powerful voice from another dimension; a determined descent to battle other powers back home. Jesus is like a superhero who lays down his life for his friends and opens life and eternity to many. Jesus is a hero who dies, so that others may live.

Inherent in the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is the promise of a life beyond what’s apparent to earthly eyes in our ordinary daily living. There’s more to life, and beyond this life, than we can see, most of the time. Both Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and the Prophets, were believed by some Jews to be God’s advance scouts of the end times. Because Elijah went bodily into heaven (*2 Kings 2:9-12*) and Moses’ grave was never found (*Deuteronomy 34:4-7*), these two men of faith were thought to be available for God to send back at the right time. God would send them to announce that God’s reign was at hand. It’s no accident that these two appear with Jesus on the mountain. They talk with Jesus and then disappear into the cloud, which is a sign of God’s presence, (see *Exodus 40:34-38*), and the disciples hear a voice say, “***This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!***” This is like what Jesus heard at his baptism immediately before his forty days of testing and temptation.

The moment is, essentially, God saying: “***You have heard the law and the***

prophets. Now listen to my Son.” The word from the cloud, “**Listen to him,**” is a reminder to pay attention to Jesus’ words about the kingdom of God, living as his disciples, and the prediction of his suffering and death. Listening to Jesus is life changing. Who we listen to, and allow to shape our thinking, attitude, and worldview, is important. However, listening well is something most people have room to grow in. I know I do. Even the phrase, “pay attention”, reminds us that truly listening is costly and demands something from us. Henning Mankell, a Swedish writer, lived on and off for 25 years in Mozambique, a country located on the southeast coast of Africa. He wrote, “The simplest way to explain what I’ve learned from my life in Africa is through a parable about why human beings have two ears but only one tongue. Why is this? Probably so that we have to listen twice as much as we speak. In Africa, listening is a guiding principle. It’s a principle that’s been lost in the constant chatter of the Western world, where no one seems to have the time or even the desire to listen to anyone else. From my own experience, I’ve noticed how much faster I have to answer a question during a TV interview than I did 10, maybe even 5, years ago. It’s as if we have completely lost the ability to listen.”²

Listening and hearing are not the same thing. When God encourages us to listen to Jesus, that implies far more than the physical act of hearing; **it means: listen and obey, listen and follow, listen and do what he says.** We all choose what kind of listeners we’re going to be. Think about something as foundational as prayer: what percentage of the time we spend praying is speaking to God, asking for things and interceding for others, and how much time is spent simply listening in silence for God to speak to us? As one person observed, “Prayer is not a matter of *my* calling to get God’s attention, but of my finally *listening to the call of God*, which has been constant, patient, and insistent in my inner being. In prayer, as in the whole salvation story unfolded by Scripture, God is reaching out to me, speaking to me, and it is up to me to be polite enough to pay attention.”³

Jesus speaks about listening, believing, obeying many times. For example, in **Matthew 21:28-32**, Jesus says, “What do you think? A man had two

² The Art of Listening, The New York Times (December 10, 2011)

³ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Speech, Silence, Action!

sons; he went to the first and said, “*Son, go and work in the vineyard today.*” He answered, “*I will not*”; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “***I go, sir***”; **but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?** They said, “*The first.*” Even Jesus’ opponents recognize that the person who truly listens is the person who acts on what he or she has heard. To be asked to do something and to say, “Sure, I’ll go,” without having the intention, desire, or conviction to act, is not to truly listen. Jesus says that the son in the story who truly listened and did the will of his father was the one who went and did what his father asked. The same is true for us, as followers of Christ. If we say, “Yes,” to Jesus, but that “yes” doesn’t influence our thoughts, words, and actions, then the Lord may fairly ask if we’re listening and doing the Father’s will, which is what God wants us to do.

On the Mountain of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John are overwhelmed by the vision they witness and the voice from the cloud, and “*they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.*” There are many people who feel overcome by fear today. Jesus is so caring and tender that he comes to them and touches them. This is tangible and physical; it lets them know they’re okay. Jesus says, “***Get up and do not be afraid.***” Some of you need to see that Jesus is with you and hear him saying to you, “***Get up and do not be afraid.***” **Jesus says to people, in the Gospels, do not fear or do not be afraid more than twenty times.** We can be afraid for many reasons, including our health or the health of someone we love; fear about our finances or the uncertainty of the future; fear about war and instability. Whatever is causing you to feel afraid, I invite you to picture Jesus reaching out to you, touching you, and saying, “***Get up and do not be afraid.***”

Finally, “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “***Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead***” (Matthew 17:9). Why does Jesus tell them not to share the vision they experienced with anyone, until after he was raised from the dead? Well, who would have believed them if they did share it? A vision of Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus seems easier to believe after Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Not too long after this experience on the mountain that illuminated who Jesus truly was for Peter, James, and John, Jesus entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. The whole city was stirred and asked, “***Who is this?***” The crowds answered,

‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee’” (Matthew 21:10-11). The crowds don’t know who Jesus truly is. This is not the full identity of Jesus. Jesus is prophet, priest, king, and messiah. They have seen something real, but they have not yet seen clearly or fully. They can celebrate him in the moment, but they will struggle to follow him when they find out that his kingship leads to a cross, instead of a throne. Even his closest disciples have struggled with this, as well. This is the warning within the text: It’s possible to praise Jesus loudly, and misunderstand him deeply, at the same time.

From the cloud, the voice had said, ***“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”*** Matthew wants all of us to be able to answer the question, *“Who is this?”* by saying **Jesus is God’s beloved Son and he is a King who is coming to reign.**

In our Mountains of God series, we’re being reminded that some of Jesus’ most important words and actions occurred on a high place. Last week, we heard how Jesus climbed a hill and gave the Sermon on the Mount, which contains some of his most remarkable and powerful teaching. Jesus climbed the Mount of Transfiguration and was transformed and spoke with Moses and Elijah, and his disciples were urged to listen to him.

On Thursday, we’ll remember Jesus and the disciples being on the Mount of Olives and Jesus surrendering his will to do God’s will. On Friday, we’ll gather and hear how Jesus climbed a hill called Calvary, and was crucified and died for our sake.

Jesus came down from heaven, down the Mount of Transfiguration, down from Calvary, but he rose up from the grave with power, hope, and eternal life for all who will trust and follow him. Jesus is the Beloved Son of the Father; listen to him. Jesus is our hope of eternal salvation; listen to him. *“Let everyone with ears to hear listen.”*

Blessing: “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority, before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen” (Jude 1:24-25).

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus chose Peter, James, and John to go up the mountain with him?
2. God's voice from the cloud says, "This is my Son, the Beloved... listen to him." What does it mean to truly listen to Jesus?
3. Peter wanted to stay on the mountain and build shelters. Why do you think he reacted that way?
4. The disciples were overwhelmed with fear, but Jesus touched them and said, "Get up and do not be afraid." What does this reveal about Jesus?
5. The Bible emphasizes that listening and obeying go together. Why do you think that acting on what we hear from Jesus can sometimes be difficult?
6. Why are "mountaintop moments" with God important for our faith, even though we eventually must come back down the mountain?