

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 2, 2014

"...Listen to Him."

Matthew 17:1-9

A brilliant magician was performing on an ocean liner. But every time he did a trick, the Captain's parrot would yell, "It's a trick. He's a phony. That's not magic." Then one evening during a storm, the ship sank while the magician was performing. The parrot and the magician ended up in the same lifeboat. For several days they just glared at each other, neither saying a word to the other. Finally the parrot said, "OK, I give up. What did you do with the ship?"

The parrot couldn't explain that last trick. It was too much to comprehend, even for a smart parrot. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Scholars over the years have tried to explain what in the world Peter meant by this suggestion. But, I think trying to find meaning to these words is pointless. It's simply the way Matthew explains: Peter was frightened and he just said the first thing that came into his head. He simply could not comprehend what was happening.

In life, moments occur that are incomprehensible. The birth of a child is one of those moments. The loss of a loved one is one of those moments. There are mountain top and valley moments throughout life. We are never ready for them. They arrive unannounced changing us in irreversible ways. But there is one thing they all have in common. They demand that we be silent and listen. These moments have something to say to us, to teach us.

Too often our response is like that of Peter, babbling because we do not understand the significant, the meaningful moment. When Peter does finally quit talking, a cloud appears, envelopes them, and the voice of God gives this instruction to them. "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" That's it. Very short. To the point. What Peter said made no sense. What God said had meaning. I would like to spend a few moments this morning unpacking the meaning of it.

This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him! There is a mountain of meaning in these words. Let's look at the first idea. This is my Son. This event in the life of Christ is one of the more strange and the more difficult to understand. It has been given the name: The Transfiguration. We use big names when we can't understand something. But there are some very clear words spoken in this event. This is my Son.

Earlier Jesus had been with his disciples discussing his identity. "Who do people say I am?" he asked his disciples. Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, came the replies. "But who do you say I am?" Jesus asked. You remember Peter's answer? "You are the Christ. The Son of the living God." That was one of Peter's better moments.

Also at this time Herod had learned about Jesus and he thought Jesus was John the Baptist back from the dead. Herod had John beheaded and now thought he was coming back to get him. So, all these questions are surfacing about the identity of Jesus. There should be no question that his disciples are having their doubts. And so, Jesus takes his inner circle up a mountain for his private encounter. It is there that they learn in a definite way who Jesus is. He is none other than the Son of God. No other source would have been as convincing.

There had been some big events in the life of Israel: The Exodus, Moses and the Ten Commandments, David anointed king, the return from Exile in Babylon, but none bigger than this. This was not another one of God's actions in a long history, this was God in the first person. Here was God's very own Son. It is surprising then that we learn in Luke's Gospel that the disciples fell asleep. In the middle of this event, they doze off. While they snored, oblivious to their surroundings, fantastic earth-shaking events took place. They were not aware of what was taking place. Let's not be too critical of the disciples at this point. Many times we have our heads in the clouds, enclosed in our own little world and losing sight of the larger world, and sleep through great events. This was not just another act of the God of Israel, it was the fulfillment of prophecy, this was the hopes and fears of all the years, this was God's Son.

Let's look at the second idea, Whom I Love. The disciples were hearing from heaven itself. This is my Son, whom I love. I suppose we could say there were many whom God loved. Adam he loved, but Adam disappointed him. Abraham believed God that he would have a son and he offered up his son as a sacrifice. However, even Abraham tried to force God's hand by laying with his maid servant and having Ishmael. David was a man after God's own heart but he abused the power he was given. Solomon was wise beyond his years but he brought idolatry to the land. Isaiah was a great prophet but he was a man of unclean lips. You can travel the pages of biblical history and find many whom God loved. But there is no finality to any of these. In Christ God's love is complete. There is no malice, no disobedience, no sin in him.

Let's look at the third idea: Listen to Him. I suppose that this is where most of the problems exist. Throughout history it has not been difficult for many non-Christians to believe that Jesus was a son of God. Many religions throughout the ages agreed with this concept. Nor did they take issue with the idea that God was pleased with Jesus' life. God would love any person who advocated these things, and did the things that Jesus did.

But listen? Listen to him! That's another matter all together. Most of the pain in this world is due to mankind's unwillingness to listen, to obey. Elie Wiesel tells the story of a prophet who came to a city and delivered his message every day in the marketplace. After a time his ranting became a fixture of the city's life and people regarded him with amusement when they regarded him at all. Finally, a small boy, pitying the old man, approached him and said, "Sir, why do you keep crying aloud like this every day, every year? The people here will never listen to you." "I gave up hope that they would listen to me a long time ago, I go on crying unless I begin listening to them."

In the journey to Jerusalem the disciples are given a genuine moment, a transparent happening that reveals with clarity that Christ above all pleases God and above all speaks for God. It is this glimpse that will sustain their discipleship into the future. They will continue to cry out in a world not eager to listen. But for those who will listen, they will find a mountain of meaning here on the mountain of transfiguration. They will learn from heaven itself "This is my Son, whom I love," If they will listen. Amen