

Sermon February 11, 2024 Transfiguration Sunday

This is my Son. Listen to him!

If you remember nothing else from this jam-packed Gospel passage, remember this.

This is my Son. Listen to him!

The speaker is God the Father, of course. It's the first and only time that God speaks directly to the disciples in this Gospel. It's not all the disciples, just Peter and Andrew, James and John, the first four that Jesus invited into his shared ministry. The leaders. The ones whom the others respected. They're up on a mountain, the usual place where one goes to meet the Divine One. It's a place apart from their regular lives. The air is thin. The power of the transformed look of Jesus, with his blindingly white garments, and of the appearance of the two prophets, Moses and Elijah, has shocked the disciples. And then, as they are trying to process all of that, here comes the voice of God, all thunder and glory, proclaiming Jesus as his son and saying "listen to him!"

God had plenty of reasons to make sure that his message was clear. How many generations since Abraham had forgotten to pay attention to all God had told them through the prophets? How many generations went deaf when trouble started for them? And God had sent his son. Maybe God's people would listen if he sent someone who was human, as well as divine. Maybe now they would listen. And just to be sure, God thundered out those words: "This is MY Son. Listen to him!"

Are we listening? What of Jesus's teaching do we listen to and try to follow? The easy stuff, like not throwing stones at other people, or the hard stuff, like "love one another, even the unlovable people?" Are we listening when we hear the request for help from a person who just needs a meal and a smile, or are we saying "well, if she'd pull herself up by her bootstraps I wouldn't have to give her money?"

Are we listening when someone seems lost in a whole lot of hatred of others around them and needs to remember that we are to treat people as we wish to be treated?

Are we listening when there's bad news and we decide we need to find someone to blame it on, whether or not that's true?

Are we listening when we decide that what we personally want is more important than what the whole group or church or nation actually needs?

Are we listening only on Sundays, and then the rest of the week we forget everything Jesus taught us?

I fear that more often than I care to admit, I'm a part time listener. I allow myself to be distracted. I'm tired. I'm frustrated by something or someone. And then I do something or say something that, on reflection, I wish I hadn't.

You too?

When God says "This is my Son. Listen to him," he's making very clear that this is the one we should be paying attention to. Not the other "attractions" of the world. The devil tempted Jesus to self-reliance (only I can take care of myself – I don't need any God of God's Son guy), political dominion (I'm the king of the world – ummm, no you're not), and civil religion (I've got to make sure that everyone thinks about religion the same way I do and agrees that the country is Christian in the same way I believe Christianity should be, and oh, by the way, I should rule!) and Jesus says no to every one of those temptations. And Satan is still tempting folks with those different sins, and we're still falling prey to them.

Listening to Jesus isn't translating his words into something that's comfortable for us. Sometimes Jesus says things that make us downright uncomfortable. And still God says "This is my Son. Listen to him!"

Are we listening or are we just hearing? The great twentieth century composer Igor Stravinsky once said “to listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.” It’s not enough to just hear the words, and perhaps think “what an elegant turn of phrase!” It’s not about rhetoric, it’s about belief and action.

Because what Jesus says to us is hard. He says things that are hard to do – and doing is the whole point. Jesus speaks, and if we listen, truly listen, we are transformed as he was transformed on that mountaintop. We are transformed into people of love and action, not casual observers on the sidelines as if the battle between good and evil is a tennis match at Wimbledon. “Good shot.” “Oh, bad luck, that!”

The shock that the disciples felt, the amazement at Jesus’ appearance, the presence of prophets that were dead for eons, is the same shock we can feel – a good shock of God’s power and the Good News – when we truly listen.

Listen.

There was a praise song a few years back called “open the ears of my heart” that was quite popular. It was a paraphrase from St. Augustine of Hippo: *“Behold, Lord, the ears of my heart are before Thee; open Thou them, and say unto my soul, I am thy salvation.” When I hear, may I run and lay hold on Thee.*”¹

May we listen, truly listen. Not just hearing and then ignoring, but like Augustine, may we run toward Jesus’ words and respond to them, in love and in faith. Amen.

¹ *Confessions* 1, 1.15