

“Listen to Him”
Mark 9:2-10

Several weeks ago I started this series on baptism, and we began with the story of Jesus’ own baptism. He comes out of the water of the Jordan River and the heavens break open and a voice comes from heaven, “This is my son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.” That story began our journey of understanding baptism and what it means for our lives, because it *all* begins with being God’s child. As the catechism says, in life and in death, we belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. We are sheep of his own fold, lambs of his own flock, sinners of his own redeeming. Created for his glory, redeemed by his goodness, destined for presence. Whatever else anyone else may say about you, nothing is more true than this: you are a child of God, and the words from heaven are words for you: you are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love. In you I am well pleased.

Today, we close this series on baptism and begin the journey of Lent by hearing those words again – except this time from a different story, in a different setting, and with a twist. In the 9th chapter of Mark, we are making the turn toward Jerusalem and the cross and resurrection; we are beginning the final act of Jesus’ life. Jesus has taught, he has worked miracles, he has healed, he has gathered his disciples; and his work is nearing the end. And the disciples are beginning to figure out who Jesus is, at least Peter has a hunch. Jesus asked them all, who do people say that I am? Peter responded, “You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Peter is beginning to figure it out. But then when Jesus tells them about his suffering and death, Peter rebukes him, saying “Don’t say that Lord!” Like he was just another prophet. So Peter has not quite gotten it yet. But he’s on the right track.

Perhaps that is why Jesus chose Peter, along with James and John, for this mountaintop experience. They were getting it, beginning to understand who Jesus really is. So Jesus took them with him up a high mountain to be alone. And right after they got there, he was transformed in front of them. Perhaps it was almost like a dream, suddenly they saw him standing there in clothes that were brilliant white – whiter than you could possibly bleach them. Dazzling white. Then standing with him appeared Moses and Elijah. How did they know it was Moses and Elijah? They hadn’t seen a picture; they didn’t wear nametags. Maybe this vision is like a dream; no one has to tell you who people are in a dream, you just know or you don’t. They probably just knew. Jesus and Moses and Elijah stand there talking like old friends. If those three disciples needed to know who Jesus was, this confirmed it. The heroes of their faith were standing talking with their friend Jesus, confirmation that Peter was right – he is the Messiah, he is the son of God.

Peter, James, and John, though, are so terrified they do not know what to do or say. You think, when you’re standing down on level ground with everyone else that you would *like* to have a mountaintop experience with God. It would be good to be in God’s presence, to see a vision and hear a voice. You would like to hover in that space between earth and heaven, to hear God talking, to meet Moses and Elijah, to ask God all the questions you’ve been wondering. You think it would be good, and then it happens. When it happens, when you’re in the presence of the living God, in that space between heaven and earth, it is a soul-shaking time. It can scare the daylight out of you.

Peter, James, and John were scared to death, and so Peter did what Peter did best. He started talking. Imagine this: Moses, Elijah, and the dazzling Jesus are talking and Peter interrupts! You have to admire his boldness. He kind of fumbled around, and managed to say, “Lord it is good that we’re here. We can build three shrines, one for each of you! That way we can mark this moment. People can come here and visit, and pray. Everyone will remember for generations that this is where you were transformed! And we were here! It’s obvious this why you brought us here, so we could build shrines.” Jesus must have been thinking, Peter that’s not why I brought you here. But the Common English Bible translation puts it so well: Peter said this because they didn’t know how to respond.

How do you respond to the revelation of the living God? What Peter is doing is what we all do when we encounter God – we look for a practical way to respond. How many people have come in to a pastor and said something like, “God spoke to me, God was present to me, God was there for me... and so I want to become more involved in the church. Or I want to get my family into worship. Or I want to go on a mission trip. Or I want to join a Bible study. Or I want to give this gift to the church.” All of these things are ways of marking an experience with God, trying to respond when you find yourself suddenly on the mountain before the presence of dazzling white, suspended in the space between heaven and earth.

And in a way that’s what Lent is about, right? We begin the journey to Good Friday and Easter Sunday; we know that we will see there the complete and unconditional love of God on the cross, the complete and total of Christ risen from the dead. So in Lent we try to respond. We usually take on a discipline of some sort to deepen our relationship with God. Perhaps it’s joining a Bible study or reading a book like the one we’re working through as a church, *Simply Christian*. Perhaps it’s taking on a prayer and study time each morning, and through that growing closer to the God who is revealed in Jesus. Perhaps it’s doing an act of service, and giving your life away. Perhaps you give up something that has an unhealthy control on your life, something that requires discipline to give up. If you’re going to do that, today is advance notice – Lent starts on Wednesday.

All that is to say, there is a lot of similarity between us and Peter. It seems silly at first to think that he would speak up in the presence of that holy gathering, and then offer to build shrines – as if that was the most important thing of the moment, getting a construction project going. But he was just trying to respond to God, in the only way that he knew how. And in that he is no different than we are. God encounters us, encounters you – in a car, in a hospital room, in a time of prayer, on a retreat, at a graveside, in a counselor’s office, in your living room, on a walk by the river. Some place, ordinary place, is transformed into a very high mountain and you are in the presence of the living God. And you simply want to respond; because that is how we are made. We are made to respond to God. And when we go off to start to building our shrines of our own, I sometimes wonder whether God is saying, that wasn’t quite what I had in mind. That’s not why I spoke to you. I really didn’t want you to do all that. It’s actually more like this...

Just after Peter offers his idea of building shrines, the voice comes from heaven again. The first words are the same words we heard at the baptism: This is my Son, whom I love. But then, the voice said something new: “Listen to him.” Listen to him. It was as if the Spirit of God were reading Peter’s thoughts. Saying, Peter if you want to respond to this moment, then do this: *Listen to him*. That’s all. Listen. You don’t need to build any shrines because the shrine is your life. A life that listens to him is the response that God desires.

Listening is so much more than hearing. Hearing kind of goes in one ear and out the other. “Yeah, I hear you!” But listening is a posture, an attitude, a way of life. You listen with a heart to understand and follow and learn and a desire to obey. Listening is hearing with an open and teachable spirit. Listening is the response that God desires. When God communicates with you, when God blesses you, when God reaches you, when God challenges you, God desires no other response than this, a life that listens. The whole work of Jesus was to create people who could listen because people who could listen could be in a relationship with God; people who could listen could follow God’s will. A life that listens to the Son of God is the response of faith.

As we stand here at the threshold of Lent, I’ve been wondering – and perhaps you have – what am I going to do for Lent? What will I give up? What will I take on? How will I mark this season? How will I respond to what happens on Good Friday and Easter? I still haven’t decided. But the voice from heaven tells us which way to go, whatever we choose. Go in the way of listening. Whatever you do for Lent, listen. However you respond to God, listen to him. When you find yourself suspended in the space between heaven and earth, for God’s sake, listen to him.