

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey  
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton  
March 2, 2025 - Transfiguration Sunday  
Luke 9:28-43a, "Listen to Him"

I'm drawn to the story of Christ's transfiguration like a moth to the flame. In the gospel of John, Jesus claims that he is the light of the world. But in the other gospel, Jesus actually glows. It's mysterious and beautiful and a little weird. The first time I ever preached on this text I happened upon two perfectly juxtaposed commentaries. The first: "Read the story of the transfiguration... Envision yourself with Peter, James and John as you read. Experience the emotions that might have welled up within you." And the second: "It is no good inviting the congregation to envision themselves there on the mountain with the disciples; it taxes the imagination beyond credulity."

Well, then. On that mountain, through the eyes of Peter, James, and John, we witness a medley of glory and confusion that probably is beyond our imagination. Jesus takes on a transfigured shine, Elijah and Moses stop by for a midnight chat, and the disciples tremble with terror. In the midst of this mountaintop experience, a cloud overshadows the whole mountain, and the sweet thunderous voice of God proclaims, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

The transfiguration is a confounding story. This isn't a fireworks display or a cinematic special effects trick. This is God, dramatically bursting into history. God wants to make sure sure it's abundantly clear - at least, as clear as it can be through the veil of a cloud - who Jesus is in relation to the prophets, and who Jesus is in relation to the cosmos. Of course, the moment doesn't last. Peter's eagerness to build a tabernacle to memorialize the moment was a desperate attempt to capture it and make it last forever. But God's glory cannot be contained any more than God's voice can be recorded on a voice memo. The moment ends, but the commandment remains: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

### ***Listen to him.***

We might not have been on that mountain, seeing what Peter, James, and John saw, but even in their haze they preserved God's commandment to listen to what his Son actually had to say. This commandment is part of the transfiguration, bound to the revelation of God's glory. By listening to the beloved Son of God, we glorify him. By listening to the Word, we participate in the transfiguration.

This is how a supernatural story gets very practical. There is a reason for the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus was not born in Bethlehem only to die a violent death on Calvary. If that were the case, the evangelists wouldn't have bothered to document the parables and miracles. The gospel story would be completely alien without the voice of Jesus speaking a new word to Creation.

Listen to him in the moment of brilliant, shining, mountaintop glory. And listen to him the morning after, as you come back down into the valley, into the realm of failure and fear and pain.

Our crew immediately encounters a crowd upon their return from the mountain. From that crowd emerges a terrified father. "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not."

Maybe we don't have the capacity to imagine a child in the grip of an evil spirit. But we do have the capacity to empathize with a father standing by while forces beyond his control harm his son. His words are echoed by every parent who cries out for every child mauled and maimed by disease, hunger, and war. His prayer is frantic - desperate and angry.

The response from Jesus is kind of cranky; to be fair, he did just pull an all-nighter. "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" And then, even as he's still shaking with frustration, Jesus heals the boy and gives him back to his father.

It's hard to listen to the harsh words of Jesus in that passage. But if we are paying close attention, we see that Jesus was angry because the Disciples had not listened to him. Shortly before this powerful story unfolded, Jesus had given the Disciples power and authority to drive out demons and cure diseases. But they couldn't do it. Their lack of trust - their failure to listen to Jesus - had caused an innocent child to suffer. They were powerless because they didn't believe that Jesus had truly given them the ability to heal in his name. Ironically, if anyone gets a gold star for listening in this story it's the unclean spirit. When Jesus issues a rebuke, it listens the first time.

We may see an angry Jesus in this story, but it is an empathetic rage. It is compassion that burns in the bones.

What good would the incarnation be if Jesus stayed a comfortable distance from pain? What good would the transfiguration be if the light didn't reach into the deepest valleys of suffering?

The charge remains: This is God's son, God's chosen: *listen to him*. Pay attention to what makes him angry. Ponder his parables. Turn your attention to his teachings. Notice where he makes you uncomfortable. Contemplate his wisdom. Listen to him as you pray for peace, listen to him as you work for justice. Listen to him as you ponder sacred scripture and listen to him as you make sense of the world.

Again and again, listen to Jesus. And with our ears attuned to the Word made flesh, perhaps we will see glimpses of his glory - slivers of brilliant, holy light shining in the darkness. Perhaps we will be astounded at the greatness of God. May it be so.