

BE QUIET AND LISTEN**Cooke's-Portsmouth****February 26, 2017****Matthew 17:1-9**

In a demanding moment-be it a crisis or trying to get dinner on the table- it is often heard said, "Don't just sit there do something!" But the subtle teaching of the transfiguration is the opposite. In essence God says to Peter, "Don't just do something, sit there!" You know the story. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain where he converses with Elijah and Moses and is transfigured before their eyes. Some might be struck mute by the experience, but Peter is a talker. Peter is still talking- all agog about what he is witnessing and in whose company he stands- and God stops his frenetic babbling with the command to listen to the Beloved. We too get caught up in the drama and the mystery: Jesus glowing and standing with two of the heroes of the faith. It is understandable that Peter would be completely swept away. Would want to do something to preserve the moment and maintain the memory. What better way than to erect dwellings. But Peter is silenced mid- sentence

We have assumed that he made the suggestion and then there was this time of silence for his plan to be given some consideration. But that is not the case. It was milliseconds at best. It is as if God says to Peter midsentence, "Shut up and listen to what my son has to say! Don't just do something for the sake of doing. Sit there. Don't do anything but listen."

Year after year on the final Sunday of the season of Epiphany and the Sunday preceding Lent the church revisits this story that is contained in all three synoptic gospel. Heretofore I have tried to understand the mystery which really is beyond understanding. I have tried to put myself into the sandals of Peter and the other disciples who must have awed and frightened at the same time.

Like Peter I may have been prone to babble rather than sit with the silence. And then there is the commandment of Jesus as they make their way down the hill to tell no one for the moment what they have witnessed. I have wondered why be bothered to invite them in the first place if they can't talk about it afterwards? I have also wondered who would believe them if they did disclose?

Have we not have moments of awe and inspiration that are so far beyond our understanding that if we choose to share them we usually preface them with "You are going to think that I am crazy." In his essay on why I believe that I am ready to join the church Matthew Maas shared a story that he had heard from a Canadian soldier while serving in Afghanistan. The soldier and his unit were on a routine mission and became caught in crossfire. The soldier prayed for God's grace and then took cover behind a tree. That tree saved his life. When he returned home following his tour he opened up Google Maps to show his family the tree that had saved his life and it was not there. The soldier believes, and shared with young Hockey Players at a service, his faith that God caused the tree to appear for his protection.

The soldier may tell that story and have people respond that it was only his imagination; that when one's life is threatened we may not be firing on all cylinders. Or that the tree was probably destroyed in a subsequent crossfire. I don't know how often he recounts the story or to what kind of an audience. For him it was like a transfiguration: impossible to explain but life transforming. Empowering. Awesome. Proof of God's grace and power. An answer to prayer. Unlike Peter he did not want to build a cairn or a booth to commemorate or freeze in time. It is sufficient to remember and to tell the story and to give the credit to God. One more illustration of how a tree saves life. Like Calvary.

David Lose has suggested that the transfiguration of Jesus was also the transfiguration of Peter. In his commentary he writes:

The scene moves so quickly from moments of hilarity to poignancy that it's easy to miss. There is Peter, falling all over himself looking for something to do, when the voice from heaven literally interrupts him, saying "Would you shut up already, and just listen to him!" But of course it's not funny for long. In fact, it's kind of terrifying, and so Peter falls to the ground, probably covering his ears and shutting his eyes hard. And then it's over -- the voice, the light, the heroes of the past -- nothing is left except Jesus, Jesus who is reaching out to him; touching him and telling him to "get up."

Peter needs to be pulled up off the ground, perhaps wondering if anything had actually happened or whether he had imagined it all. And then on the way down the mountain Jesus will again intimate of his impending death and destiny. Peter will struggle to listen, to follow, to be faithful. Actually, he will more than struggle, he will fail. And Jesus will reach out, raise him up again, and send him forth. I have a hunch that each time Peter fell down and got up again, he would look back on this day and recall those words, "Just listen to him!"

That's what I mean by saying that this is the moment when Peter's transfiguration begins -- when he fails, falls, and is lifted up again and realizes that above and beyond everything else, he is called to listen to Jesus. This pattern, I think, shapes the life of every Christian. We, too, of course, try our best, sometimes succeeding and sometimes coming up short. We, too, have moments of insight and moments of denial. We, too, fall down in fear and are raised up again to go forth in confidence. We, too are called to listen, called to discern God's way in the world, called to partner with God and in this way be transformed.

The transfiguration story is a deeply theological one and a challenge to understand. Matthew makes parallels between the experience of Moses on Sinai receiving the tablets and Jesus as the new Moses. How does this story of awe and mystery peppered with mundane human foible inspire us in our day and generation? If we concentrate more on “Don’t just do something sit there” are we giving the story the credence it deserves? I agree with David Lose that this story is about Jesus and his sonship to God but it also about Peter. Peter, James and John witnessed something awesome that day, but they also experienced the tender side of God Incarnate.

Patrick Wilson, American Presbyterian minister has written: This is the way that God comes into the world: not simply the cloud of mystery, not only a voice thundering from heaven but as a human hand placed on a shoulder saying don’t be afraid. God comes to us quietly, gently so that we may draw near in faith and not be afraid. God’s glory is majestic and so far beyond our capacity to receive it that we can take just as much of God’s glory as a human hand can hold.

What a lovely reminder. We read the story and concentrate most on the glory of God; the presence of Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus; the sound of God’s voice; the image of Jesus as the new incarnation of Torah and the prophetic. We concentrate on Peter and his seeming desire to simply stay on the mountain forever; as so many of us have when we have been graced to experience standing on holy ground. And the story passes so quickly that we almost pay no attention to the ending: Peter, James and John cowering in fear on the ground; unaware of what happened next in the divine encounter. Jesus coming to them to reassure them; to help them up and accompany them down the mountain. And the command that they continue to be quiet and listen as they resume their normal routine of being the disciples of the itinerant preacher and healer; the Beloved of Almighty God.

The myriad times that I have preached this text I have struggled so much with the mystery that the message of being still and paying attention has eluded me. But this year it has become a powerful reminder of the importance of sitting quietly in the presence of grace. The command of God resonates that we are to pay serious and thoughtful attention to the man and the message of the beloved son. And the image of Jesus reaching out to affirm and abet the frightened disciples; to get up and carry on; this is the teaching that I want to really consider this Transfiguration.

To put aside the propensity to always feel as though we ought to be doing something; anything and instead to be quiet and listen. I believe that if we are quiet enough; mindful enough; and focussed enough we too will see and be empowered by Grace.

I stood at two hospital bedsides this week. I was privileged to witness the incredible bond between a husband and wife as they deal with terminal illness. We did not sit in complete silence but there were the looks exchanged between the two that touched my heart. The loving look on the face of the one with the illness who both appreciates the support of her partner and her awareness of the pain that she is causing her beloved who cannot do anything to reverse the course. And the look on the face of the husband who deeply loves his wife and wants to spend every moment that he can by her side in sickness as in health. I was reminded again of how those of us in caring professions get to be intimate strangers with the people that we are privileged to share the journey with. Their love was palpable; deep; sacred and empowering. I was awed in the presence of it. Transformed by it in complete and utter humility.

The second moment came when I went to visit an elderly matriarch who is dying at home. Her son informed me when I arrived at the appointed time that he had just been informed by his mother that she was very tired and wanted to sleep and not be interrupted. I went into the room

and she opened her eyes. All I said was that I realized that she was tired and wanted to sleep and I would not stay. I risked taking her hand because she is still feisty and independent despite the gravity of her prognosis and she said that she was very tired. And then she simply squeezed my hand. If a picture paints a thousand words, there was ten thousand words in the hand squeeze. It was transfiguring: don't just do something; sit there.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.