

“Learning to Listen”

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Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

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The story of the transfiguration of Jesus carries such a heavy load of meaning that it can be hard to decide where to start or where to focus. Whenever I read a story like this I'm reminded of the words of the native American storyteller, Black Elk, who often began his stories by saying, "Now, I don't know if this happened in exactly this way, but I do know this story is true." Truth, when it comes to sacred stories, isn't dependent on verifiable accounts. We don't know the facts. We only know what has been seen and heard and handed down. So this story reveals a truth about Jesus that can only be conveyed but never proven.

But it reveals other truths as well. It reveals something about discipleship and what it means to attach ourselves to Jesus and what our relationship with him requires. The three disciples with him on the mountain, Peter, James and John, are a representative sample of the whole body of disciples. There's nothing in this story, or anywhere else in the gospels, to suggest that they are somehow to be elevated above the others. In fact, in Matthew, Mark and Luke at least, only Peter could arguably be said to have special status; yet only Peter is singled out as the one who denied Jesus in the face of danger. So this experience of Jesus' glory surely isn't meant only for these three, to give them some sort of inside track on faithfulness.

When they go up the mountain with Jesus, all of us who want to be his followers go with them. There are times in our lives when we are left speechless in the presence of something too powerful for words. I remember once in school seeing a movie about Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address. It was sort of a re-enactment told through the eyes of a man who had been there as a child. He was telling some children about the speech and came to the end of his story and said, "After the president spoke, there was complete silence from the crowd." The children he was talking to were disappointed to hear that and one of them said, "I guess no one liked his speech if they didn't clap." And the old man said, "No. That speech was holy. Clapping for it would have been like applauding the Lord's Prayer." There are times when nothing but silence will do.

But most of us aren't very comfortable with silence. Our lives are so filled with noise, with voices insisting we speak up, that it can be hard for us to be still and to listen. That may seem like a very modern problem, but I think it may be a feature of the human condition that's been with us from the very start. In this little book *The Way of the Heart*, the late Henri Nouwen discusses the importance of silence for the spiritual life. He tells the story, for instance, of the Desert Father Abbot Macarius who "after he had given the benediction to the brethren in the church at Scete, said to them, 'Brethren, fly.' One of the elders answered him, 'How can we fly further than this, seeing we are here in the desert?' Then Macarius placed his finger on his mouth and said, 'Fly from this.' So saying, he entered his cell and shut the door."*

But on that mountain Peter just couldn't help himself. He had to say something. He needed to somehow place his stamp on what he was seeing, to mark it in some way. He comes across as very foolish and we all chuckle at his clumsiness. But who of us would have been able to keep still? In the presence of Jesus' glory who wouldn't want to insert themselves somehow? Why is it so hard just to listen? The story is told of a young monk who asked his spiritual father how to respond to praise and criticism. The father tells him, "Go to the graveyard, and abuse the dead." So the young monk goes and comes back, and the father asks him what the dead had done. "Nothing," the monk replies. So the father says, "Go back and praise them." Again the young monk returns and reports that the cemetery had remained silent as before. The father tells him, "Do the same as the dead; human judgment no longer affects them for they stand always in the sight of God."[†]

In the presence of God's glory all we can do is remain still. "Listen to him," God commands the disciples. Now, they had gone up the mountain to pray, at least that's what Jesus had in mind. The disciples themselves were more inclined to sleep – which may be another reminder that this story includes us and isn't only about them. But even prayer can be too filled with words. Once a reporter interviewing Mother Teresa asked what she says to God when she prays. She answered, "Nothing. I listen." So the reporter asked what God says to her. She answered, "Nothing. God listens." As disciples of Christ we're invited into a relationship of mutual listening. In that relationship the longings of our hearts are revealed to God and the desires of God's heart are revealed to us.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus had just begun to reveal the desire of God's heart to his disciples. Just before this scene on the mountain he tells them what lies ahead in Jerusalem; he tells about his rejection and death. Then he adds that being his disciple means walking the same path; it means incurring the world's rejection and enduring death, death to our egos, death to our privilege, death to our complacency and arrogance. That's what they're told to listen to; they're told to listen to Jesus' words but even more to listen to his actions, to make his life their own.

For disciples of Christ learning to listen means learning to walk the path he walks. It means learning to live for him and for those he loves. By letting go of our selves and our own needs, by taking upon ourselves his burden and sharing in his life and death, his glory revealed on that mountain becomes our glory and we are transfigured, made new in the image of Christ.

Amen

* Nouwen, Henri J. M., *The Way of the Heart*, p. 29

† Job, Norman P. and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, p. 109