

Sermon for Sunday, February 19, 2023
Transfiguration of Our Lord - Last Sunday after Epiphany
“God is Still Speaking”
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A few years back the Congregational church had a really neat sign in front of their building: it said God is still Speaking. I thought that was pretty clever, but the reason I really liked it is because it's true. God IS still speaking here through the scriptures, preaching, prayer, and the sharing of the word of peace. And God is still speaking in our world, in our lives, and in creation. This morning's Gospel reading is one of those rare moments in the New Testament when God's voice is heard directly by Jesus and by his followers. It's almost identical to what God said at Jesus' Baptism: This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. But at the Transfiguration, God adds: LISTEN TO HIM! Listen to Jesus!

When Jesus takes his disciples with him up the mountain, they have a powerful mystical experience. Since all kinds of important revelations about God happen on mountain tops, that's not really a surprise. Suddenly Jesus is filled with light, like it's coming from inside him. Then Elijah and Moses appear, and Peter, who doesn't seem to be able to just sit still and be fully present in this awe-inspiring moment, says: Hey let me build you guys three tiny houses! Thankfully, before he can get started on his construction project, God interrupts him and says: LISTEN TO HIM! And just as suddenly as it happened, it's over, and Jesus says to his friends: Get up and DO NOT BE AFRAID.

So, that's two divine commands in these nine little verses: Listen to Jesus. And Don't be Afraid. That's important for the disciples because Jesus had been saying some things that they didn't understand at all, scary things. Just before he took them up the mountain, Jesus told them that he was going to Jerusalem where he would be arrested, suffer, and die, and rise on the third day. That was a major shock to the disciples because they were all expecting Jesus to overthrow the Roman oppressors and reestablish the actual, physical Kingdom of Israel. Jesus dying didn't fit into their plan, at all. After they went through all that terrible fear and suffering and the death of Jesus, somewhere in their hearts they remembered God telling them to Listen to Jesus. And when Jesus rose and appeared to them, they heard again those comforting words: Do Not Be Afraid.

Where do you and I hear God speaking today? And what is God saying? And how do we know if it's a God/Jesus/Holy Spirit voice, or just our own wishful thinking or overactive imagination?? Where is God speaking now? Well, right here in church, in public worship when we listen to scripture together. Now, it might be that when we come here we think that we are just going to hear words about God, words about Jesus. And it might be that sometimes what we hear can seem like the “same old, same old” stories you've heard a hundred times – nothing new there. But what if we dare to believe that we might hear God's voice speaking in this place? What if, when we come here, we bring a certain hope and expectation? What if we listen with

open hearts and minds? It could be that something we've heard many, many times, suddenly is heard anew. And like Jesus' friends on the mountain, we will be astonished!

That happened to me last Sunday, right there in that pew, during Pastor Amy's powerful sermon. I always cringe and brace myself for a good old bout of Lutheran shame and guilt when the teachings about divorce and remarriage are part of the gospel reading, like they were last week. But when Pastor Amy talked about how we understand these challenging texts today, she said we must interpret them with a Christ-like ethic of care and protection. She boldly proclaimed that a Christ-like ethic of care and protection rejoices in the many wonderful marriages that come after a divorce. She said: Your marriages are a witness to Christian resurrection, hope and new life. When I heard her say that, from this pulpit, it was as if I heard God's own word of blessing and delight in my marriage. That was sooooo powerful! And I know I'm not alone and that many, many of you have also experienced God's strong word of grace in this place.

But God's communication with us, God's connection with us is not confined to this space on Sunday mornings. God's voice is speaking to us in our lives and in the world out there. Our weekly practice of listening to God here helps us to hear God's voice out there. At the Thursday Bible study we talked about this question of where we hear the voice of God in our lives. One person shared about how troubled she was by something she had read in last Sunday's paper about how the legislature is proposing to remove protections for Trans youth, to make it a law that teachers and other trusted adults in the school system must report to the parents if a student confides in them about their gender identity, even if that disclosure could pose a serious risk to the child. She, and I would guess many of us, find that deeply disturbing. And that sense of being troubled by something in the news? That is the voice of God at work in your heart and your head, rousing you to prayer, and to action.

SO am I saying that God can speak to us, connect with us through the news? Yes I am, because the news is where we learn about the troubles, the pain, the suffering, the injustice in our communities, our state, our country, and the world. And we can do that because we've heard Jesus say: Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid to look at that pain and suffering. Because when our hearts are troubled by the things we see and hear, it is a sure sign that we are connected through the Spirit in a powerful way to the very heart of God.

But you may be thinking, can we really be certain that God is speaking to us through a news report? Tricky question because we're all human, we're all susceptible to "confirmation bias". That's when we filter what we're hearing through our own narrow lenses. I have a Trans grandchild, so I do have a particular set of lenses through which I view issues that affect Trans kids. But Pastor Amy gave us a beautiful way to help discern what is from God, and what may not be from God. She talked about the Christ-like ethic of care and protection. "Care and protection" is the active form of LOVE. Does restricting the rights of Trans youth fit with a Christ-like ethic of care and protection? Applying that Christ-like ethic can help us discern what is of God and what is not. Will we make mistakes, fail, miss an opportunity, do something we regret? Probably, but following the leading of the spirit, which is that inner voice of God, sometimes means taking risks, maybe moving out of our comfort zone, or doing something we've never done before. And Jesus says: Do Not Be Afraid!

Lent begins this Wednesday and it's a great opportunity to practice some deep, open-hearted listening. We can do that here on Sundays and Wednesdays. We can do it in our conversations with others, in our response to the news. And because Lent corresponds to the coming of Spring, we can practice listening for God in Nature. St. Francis said that nature is God's first Bible, that in the natural world everything speaks of God. St. Francis listened to the birds, preached to the fish, called the fox his brother. Sometime soon, when it gets a bit warmer, go out to Twin Springs. Go sit on that beautiful stone bench given in memory of Ben Blair. Close your eyes, listen to the water gently bubbling up, the birds singing, and feel the sun on your face as it rises above the hillside. In that place there's a good chance that you will experience something of the Divine, of the Sacredness of creation.

I don't know how you arrived here this morning. Maybe you walked, or rode your bike; most of us drove our cars. Maybe you've never thought about it this way before, but you are here because God kindled a desire in your heart ... God whispered in your soul. Through the power of the Spirit, the power of love, God drew you to this place. I know that all of us have some mornings when getting here feels more like obligation rather than inspiration. Whether you're feeling obliged or inspired, you are here at God's invitation and call.

When we come to the table and hold our hands to receive the bread and wine, we hear the earthly voice of our worship leaders saying: The Body of Christ given for you. But if we listen deeply, with our hearts, what we will hear is Jesus' own voice saying to us: This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you. And as you rise to return to your place, remember the voice of God speaking to you today: You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.