



“Let’s Take A Hike
Transfiguration Sunday, February 14, 2021
Mark 9:2-9

The Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Jesus’ transfiguration beckons the disciples to move from the frantic pace of action into a stillness of listening.

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” wrote poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; it gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed.”¹

It is that shining grandeur that oozes around us on Transfiguration Sunday, although those of us stuck in the frozen tundra of St. Louis would gladly take the shining grandeur of a beach in Florida!

In keeping with the tradition that sermons should be announcements of good news, I do have good news for those of you who have not yet made your annual trek to the card aisle at Walgreens to purchase a Valentine’s day card: the roads are clear, and if you get moving quickly you may still avoid some of the sinking feelings of shame directed at you by others in the store. Also, you might try mixing things up a bit. It is not only Valentine’s Day but also Transfiguration day, and since no one ever sends transfiguration day cards, I’m certain you’ll have plenty of choices!

If you do go that route, I have plenty of time on my schedule in the next few weeks for pastoral counseling.

Today the secular and liturgical calendars mash together in a way that seems hard to understand. On the one hand, consumers are out purchasing millions of pounds of conversation hearts and chocolates. On the other hand, Jesus is inviting Jimmy, John, and Pete to join him on a hike up the mountain where things get a little weird. On the one hand, we celebrate the mysteries of romance, while on the other, we encounter the even more incomparable mysteries of the glory of God. Jesus invites us to follow him up the mountain today, hiking out of the lowlands of ordinary life into the high plains of God’s shining glory.

Up on the mountain, we experience the shining truth of God, fully revealed. It is a challenging story that calls us to set aside all our notions of how the world works. As Shively Smith notes, it is on this mountain that we are invited to pause for a moment to see “something we have never seen before and to embrace its possibilities.”

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44395/gods-grandeur>



I checked the other day: as from this story, it remains

nothing about the historical details surrounding the Transfiguration, though I'd say it is a good bet that it did not take place on Valentine's Day. I am sure that even though Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law, his wife would not have taken kindly to her husband going on a hike instead of taking her out to dinner!

often as I have preached a mystery. We know next to

But what happens on that day when Jesus invites Pete, Jimmy and John to take a hike remains cloaked with mystery.

Just as soon as they arrive, Jesus' complexion and clothes are suddenly transformed into a bleached-white dazzling spectacle. But well before they can say, "Tide's in, dirt's out," things get even weirder. Suddenly, the disciples see Moses and Elijah appear – and even though they've trekked across the centuries, it seems they need no introduction. Perhaps it was Elijah's t-shirt that read, "I'm with Moses." Or maybe they were wearing their church name tags that morning.

We do not know how they know who they are, but that is beyond the point. The disciples see their rabbi standing with the greatest prophets of Israel's history. It fills them with terror as they watch Moses and Elijah chat it up with Jesus. All of this is too much for Peter. His impetuosity gets the best of him. Instead of absorbing what is happening, he blurts out, "Lord, it is good for us to be here! Why don't we build dwellings for these heavenly visitors!"

Peter follows the golden rule of ministry: if you don't know what else to do, start a building campaign!

He did not know what else to say, Mark adds, for they were terrified. It's a reasonable response: what do you do when the glories of God pass in front of you? Standing in an unfamiliar place, the disciples are terrified, unsure of what they are experiencing.

We have learned about standing in unfamiliar places. After a year of not worshipping together, it has begun to feel as though this is a hike which will never end. We climb further into ever-thinning air, fearful that we may fall off the path. None of this is familiar, yet still Jesus invites us to continue climbing. Not unlike the three disciples, we may be wondering if things will ever be the same.

The same is true for those whose lives have borne the crushing weight of change, or unanswered prayer, deepest grief and unceasing pain.

None of this familiar, and the fact that we may sense that God is here does not necessarily mean we are not terrified.

The disciples respond to God's presence by trying to capture it forever. Take a picture, John tells James. Make sure this gets on Instagram! Peter does even better: let's build something to hold this moment.



But nothing can contain
disciples are called to pay

something; stand there. Stand there, Peter. Listen to the sound of God's voice break across the cavernous valleys: "This is my beloved Son, listen to him."

God's glory. Instead, the
attention. Don't do

That is the theological equivalent of "Shaddup, already!" Be quiet. Settle yourself. Pay attention.

The lesson of Jesus transfiguration for us is similar. In a moment when so much is changing, when so much has changed, we are summoned to pay attention.

Quiet yourself, even here on the threshold of change. Experience the unparalleled glory of Jesus, shining in the midst of human pain and agony. Listen to him speak with the authority and mercy of God. Pay attention as he steps down that mountain and walks toward the cross. Allow that moment to linger with you. As that great hymn says, "Breathe, o Breathe thy loving spiring into every troubled breast."

Today you and I celebrate 22 years together in ministry. Over the years, when we have gathered for worship, whether in person or online, there have been those moments when the glory of God has felt especially close. Those moments when children laughed, or we endured technical difficulties, or shared common tears have changed us. At times, like Peter, we have been confused and ever terrified by the glory of God's love.

But always comes the invitation to listen. Listen to what he is telling you, so that you may know and understand even when the experience on the mountain has faded. Listen as he talks to you on the hike back down the mountain. Listen as he teaches forgiveness, offers healing, and fills us with hope.

When everything is swirling around us and God's presence is thrust into our chaotic and fast-paced lives, this is the word that we need to hear most. Don't just do something. Stand there. Listen to Jesus.

In his book *The Listening Life*,² Adam McHugh notes that "listening is a practice of focused attention. Hearing is an act of the senses, but listening is an act of the will." We know that to be true. Your kids hear what you are saying to them, even if they are not listening. Your spouse has heard what you asked of him; whether or not he has listened is another matter.

McHugh continues, "In listening you center not only your hearts but also your mind, heart and posture on someone or something other than yourself...Listening, done well, gives power away."

Listen to him, even as you watch your step. Amen.

² *The Listening Life: Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction*, by Adam S. McHugh. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015.)