

February 14, 2021  
Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Stop, Look, and Listen”**

“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

Our church building is located next to an active freight train line, a fact of which we are often reminded when a train goes by while we are gathered for worship on Sundays. Even though most of the trains only have a few cars on them, the noise that they create (especially in the summer when the windows are open) can be quite disruptive. While I have usually been able to continue my sermon amid the cacophony, I find that the sound of these trains brings me back to my childhood and trips to the Laustsen family farm in New Market, which passed over an active railroad crossing at which there was no safety gate. Even time we would cross those tracks, my parents would obey the sign at the crossing to “stop, look, and listen.” Because there was a curve in the rail line before this crossing, stopping and looking often was not enough; we had to roll the windows down and listen carefully for the sound of a train that could cause serious harm if we dared cross the tracks before listening for the sound of a freight train coming down the tracks in our direction.

The need to “stop, look, and listen” that was so important at that railroad crossing is an important lesson in many areas of our life. We often need to stop what we are doing so that we give our full attention to important instructions that can make the difference between success and failure or life and death. Many situations require complete focus with our eyes and ears upon what is being communicated, because anything less than total concentration can have devastating consequences. It may not be a freight train barreling down in our direction, but failing to heed the call the “stop, look, and listen” can make all the difference.

On this last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, we hear the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ, the episode in which our Saviour invites Peter, James, and John to accompany him “*up a high mountain apart, by themselves*” (Mark 9:2). Mountains in Scripture are often places where people have experiences of God’s presence in unique ways; one of the most famous of these is when “*the angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.*” (Exodus 3:2). In that encounter, the voice of the Lord speaks to Moses and commands him to go “*to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.*” (3:10). As Moses hears the voice of the Lord

in that place of revelation, Jesus' disciples experience a similar *theophany* (divine appearance) when Jesus was "*transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them*" (Mark 9:2-3). This "transfiguration" (*metamorphothe*) indicates that the form of Jesus was changed, giving the disciples a glimpse of the fullness of his identity as the one who is "*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary*" (Small Catechism), the child of Mary who is also "*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14), the one who Paul teaches us is "*the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.*" (Colossians 1:15-16). On this mountain, the disciples are invited to cast their eyes on the one they have known as Rabbi who is for us our "*Beautiful Saviour, King of Creation, Son of God and Son of Man.*" The three disciples witness Jesus in his glorious state which is to be his eternal state after his death and resurrection ("*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

- "To be transfigured is to be changed in outward form or appearance. Jesus' transfiguration does not alter who he is but gives to those who see the changed visage a new understanding of him because they see him outwardly in a different light ... He is not made to have a new essential self but an appearance that conveys his standing in the company of Israel's greatest prophets." – Melinda Quivik.

Mark's original audience would have recognized details of several Old Testament stories in this episode. The dazzling white clothing signals heavenly rather than earthly beings ("*As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.*" – Daniel 7:9). The mountain, cloud, and divine voice all reminded readers of God's appearance in Exodus ("*Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.*" – Exodus 24:17). The brightness of Jesus' garments evokes the light of the *Shekinah*, the divine presence perceived as radiance in the pillar of fire, on the mountain, in the sanctuary, and in apocalyptic visions; it was a radiance reflected in the face of Moses when he came from talking with God ("*Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because*

*he had been talking with God.*” – Exodus 34:29). Jewish tradition held that Moses, whose burial place is unknown, and Elijah, who was taken up in a chariot, did not die but were living in heaven:

- “Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. He was buried in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.” – Deuteronomy 34:5-6.
- “As [Elijah and Elisha] kept walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.” – 2 Kings 2:11.

Both of these important figures from the Hebrew Scriptures appear to the disciples alongside of the transfigured Jesus: “*And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.*” (9:4). Their appearance has been interpreted as representing the Law and the prophets, the Word of God proclaimed in the Old Testament of which Jesus speaks in his Sermon on the Mount: “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.*” (Matthew 5:17). Others have noted that they appear alongside of Jesus so that there can be no confusion that he is neither Moses nor Elijah but the unique Son of God, confusion that the disciples report when Jesus asks them “*’who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’*” (Mark 8:28-29).

- “Two of the great figures of Israel’s history are there, joining the older tradition with the new: Elijah and Moses, both veterans of their own mountaintop epiphanies. Here is Elijah, the prophet promised to be the harbinger of the divine inbreaking to come (Malachi 5:4-6) and a prefigure of John the Baptizer to boot. Moses appears as well, he of another six days on the mountain before the appearance of God signaled by cloud cover (Exodus 24:16-17). – Victoria Lynn Garvey

The reactions of people who experience such theophanies is a combination of awe and terror (the shepherds outside of Bethlehem were initially “terrified” at the appearance of the angels – Luke 2:9). Peter’s response in this awe-inspiring sight is to capture it for posterity: “*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*” (9:5). His suggestion to construct three booths aims at prolonging the experience; there may be a reference to the Feast of Tabernacles (*sukkoth*) which is one of the major festivals of the Jewish

year (*“You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths.”* – Leviticus 23:41). Mark informs us that this suggestion has not been thought out very thoroughly by Peter, because *“he did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”* (9:6).

Peter never receives a direct response to his suggestion. Instead, the disciples experience another theophany when *“a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’”* (9:7). The divine voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism is heard once again; but while the voice heard on the banks of the Jordan River proclaimed that *“you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”* (1:11) the voice at the Transfiguration adds a command: *“Listen to him!”* The command to “listen” (*akouo*) follows Jesus’ command *“let anyone with ears to hear listen!”* (4:23); we receive what Jesus did and said by hearing. The content of hearing corresponds to that of what is heard, the reception of grace and the call to repentance in response to salvation and its ethical demand. Faith and obedience are the marks of real hearing. The command for his disciples to “listen to him” is not merely a suggestion for the future *“but a claim that everything that Jesus has been saying must be believed and taken seriously.”* (Garvey).

- “For the apostles, the experience told them that Jesus was God’s Son and to be obeyed as he instructed them on the way to Jerusalem and death ... Jesus is not just another in a line of prophets; he is preeminent. He is to be heard, not over against Moses and the prophets, but as the proper interpreter and fulfillment of what had been preserved in the Scriptures.” – Fred Craddock.

The disciples – and all who accept the invitations to become disciples of Christ – are to listen to Jesus above all other voices, because he is the incarnate Word that dwells among us, the one who speaks with authority, the only one who has the words of eternal life. Jesus is the one to whom we are to listen faithfully as disciples, which implies hearing the Word he proclaims and living faithfully in accordance with this divine Word. The apostolic Church that is founded on the faith in the one who is *“God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made”* (Nicene Creed) believes that *“in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.”* (Colossians 1:19-20). We listen to Christ and Christ alone, because we believe that *“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12).

The disciples' experience of the transfiguration of Jesus ends as rapidly as it begins: *"Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus."* (9:8). The mountain is not meant to be a shrine or a dwelling place for Jesus or his disciples; their work would continue as they came down from the mountain, when Jesus *"ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead."* (9:9). As Jesus had responded to Peter's confession that *"you are the Messiah"* by ordering them *"not to tell anyone about him"* (8:29-30), so will the good news of Jesus Christ not be fully understood until after his death and resurrection, when the fullness of this identification as Lord and Messiah will be known, a word that he will continue to proclaim on his way to the Cross in Jerusalem:

- *"Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."* – 8:31.
- *"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."* – 9:31.
- *"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."* – 10:33-34.

The identity of the one who is transfigured before his disciples is confirmed by the Centurion who witnesses his death on the Cross and declares that *"truly this man was God's Son!"* (15:49), the one who *"humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* (Philippians 2:8-11)

- *"The Transfiguration gives the disciples the experience of witnessing a most amazing and unspeakable vision that draws them to want to stay there, dwell in that place of wonder, and then to be told by the voice of the divine that their job is not to abide in that wonder but to go back down the mountain. The voice of the cloud is directed at the disciples, to the church, rather than to the Son as it was at his baptism. It speaks of Jesus' identity so that the church can see what Jesus alone heard when he was baptized."* – Quivik.

The Word of the Lord that was proclaimed through Moses commands God's people to "*remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy*" (Exodus 20:8). Luther teaches us that this means that we are "*to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.*" (*Small Catechism*). It means that we honour the Lord's Day as a time for us as God's people to "stop, look and listen," to set aside the busyness of our daily lives and the distractions that surround us so that we can truly "listen to him," to focus all our attention on the Word of our Lord Jesus Christ which is truly the "*Word of God, Word of Life.*" It is a time for us to gather for worship (both in-person and online) which is centered and rooted in the Word of God that speaks to us that word of light and life as it was first proclaimed during Jesus' day. It is a call for us as Christians to recognize that the most important word to which we are to listen is the Word that is proclaimed to us through the one who died and rose again so that we might live with the assurance that "*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*" (Romans 6:5).

- "The church has a responsibility: to listen to God's Son. That listening does not result in staying aloof where the air is pure and the view is stunning. The church must listen to the voice of God's Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross. We are not called to have power over others but to rise up as dust that has been formed by the breath of God and give life to others, especially those who are neglected by the powerful." – Quivik.

The warning to "stop, look, and listen" was not merely another sign on the road to my grandparents' farm; it was a matter of life and death that needed to be obeyed if that journey was to be prevented from resulting in tragedy. Our journey though life as God's people is rooted in our obeying the voice first heard by the disciples on the mount of Transfiguration; we need to "stop, look, and listen" to the Word of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, for his Word is truly the "Word of eternal life," the Word which will always be "*a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*" (Psalm 119:105). May we remain steadfast to this Word that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord, the living Word that will "*support us in our final strife and lead us out of death to life.*" (Martin Luther).

Amen.