

“Listen To Him!” (Matthew 17:5) Transfiguration Sunday, 2/3/08

Some folks were waiting to be interviewed for a job as a telegraph operator. As they filled out their applications, most of them paid no attention to the dots and dashes coming in over the intercom. But suddenly one of them jumped up and ran into the manager’s office. When he came out, he told the others, “I got the job!” “How did you pull that off?” they asked. “Simple,” he said. “I listened to the message coming in over the intercom. It said, ‘The first one who comes to the manager’s office will be hired.’”

There are times when listening really pays off! In fact, it’s hard to think of a time when it doesn’t! True, there may be times when we’ve heard things we wish we hadn’t. But it’s still better to listen than be left in the dark. It’s also better to be a person who cares enough to listen – cares enough to pay attention to what people say and take it to heart. For *to listen* is more than just *to hear*. In my story, all the applicants could hear the message over the intercom. But only one paid attention. Only one took it to heart. And what a difference listening made!

Of course, this isn’t exactly a newsflash. Husbands and wives know what a difference it makes not to just hear but really listen. Parents and children know it, too. Or they should. For good listening is important in any relationship. But where it makes the biggest difference is in our relationship with God: listening to His Word.

You know, God could have just left us in the dark, with no hint of His existence, no clue as to His will, no idea what He thinks about us. That God has given us His Word *at all* is pure grace. It’s also a pretty clear sign that we need to listen to His Word. For God never speaks just to hear Himself talk! When He speaks, it is entirely for our benefit. We may not recognize this as soon as we should – just as children may not recognize the value of their parents’ guidance or spouses the value of each others’ insights – but God would not have given us His Word if it didn’t matter. So especially in our relationship with God, it’s important to pay attention and take His Word to heart. Here most of all, listening pays off!

Small wonder, then, that the main point in today’s Gospel is listening. Not “seeing” – however dazzling the transfiguration may have been. Not “feeling” – however exciting the experience may have been. No, the main point is what God tells the disciples as they see Jesus glorified: **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!”**

Now, if these words sound familiar, it’s because we heard most of them at Jesus’ Baptism. They were God’s public testimony to Jesus. But now at the Transfiguration, God adds three words more: **“Listen to Him.”** And as I said, God never speaks just to hear Himself talk. There is a good reason for adding these three words – a good reason then and now.

So what was the reason then? To be blunt, the disciples needed to do a *better job* of listening – especially Peter. If we go back to what happened six days earlier, we'll see this clearly. Six days earlier, Jesus had told the disciples that He must “**undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised.**” Pretty ominous words! So wouldn't you think Peter might mull them over, take them to heart, maybe even ask a few questions? But no! He didn't want to hear such talk. He even rebuked Jesus: “**God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you**” – as if not hearing it would stop it from happening! Then a little bit later, Jesus talked to the disciples again and told them that the path ahead would be a tough one – that, in fact, they would need to “**deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow**” Him. Not a word out of Peter this time. Not a sign he took *this* to heart, either. In fact, quite the opposite! For come the day of Transfiguration, Peter once again betrayed his cluelessness. As he beheld Jesus in all His divine splendor, he totally ignored what Jesus had said earlier about his suffering and death, totally ignored what Jesus had said about the cost of discipleship. Instead, *he* thought it would be kind of cool to prolong the mountain-top experience indefinitely: “**Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will make three dwellings here – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.**” Clearly, Peter had his own spiritual agenda. *No hardship, please. No self-denial. Certainly no cross! I'd prefer to stay up here on a spiritual high; just me and Jesus – and maybe Moses, Elijah, James, and John.* Yes, Peter had his own spiritual agenda, and it ran clean contrary to the Lord's. For whether Peter liked it or not, Jesus *would* go down to the real world again. Jesus *would* “**undergo great suffering.**” Jesus *would* “**be killed.**” All this was required for our salvation, and the sooner the disciples realized this, the better! Unless they wanted to be blind-sided, they needed to pay attention to what Jesus was telling them. For their own good, they needed to take Jesus' words to heart. Sure, Peter had confessed Jesus as the “**Son of the living God.**” But if he really believed in Jesus, he needed to go further. He needed to “**listen to Him.**”

He didn't, though. None of the disciples did. And what was the result? When Jesus' words came true, they *were* blind-sided. They ran and hid behind locked doors. Peter even denied Jesus three times – which was not only shameful but unnecessary. It didn't have to work out that way. In fact, the Transfiguration should have prepared them against such cowardice. God let them see and feel the truth about Jesus, then specifically said, “**Listen to Him!**” Listen! And what if they only had? It's too late to answer that question now, but there is a more important question that we can answer...and need to: *What can we learn from Peter's mistake?*

No doubt the answer seems obvious. When Jesus speaks to us through His Word, we need to “**listen to Him!**” But what exactly does that mean? Isn't that what we do here week after week? Isn't that what we do in our daily Bible reading? Don't we “**listen to Him**”? Maybe. Maybe not. But before we answer too quickly, let's think a bit more about the difference I mentioned earlier between “*listening*” and merely “*hearing*.”

One of the dangers of having been a Christian for quite a while is that when we hear familiar words of Jesus we assume we're listening. But are we really? Sometimes it is good to come back to these familiar words and mull them over as if we had never heard them before. In fact, sometimes it's good to come back to them and ask: *Have I really understood these words, and am I applying them the way Jesus would want? Am I?*

This question is worth exploring more deeply, and to do that let's use our imaginations. Let's imagine ourselves in Peter's place coming down from the mountain. We've just witnessed Jesus' Transfiguration, but already the vision has vanished, already the feeling grows weak. Only the command "**Listen to Him**" remains as strong and compelling as ever, and that is what we carry back down with us to our everyday life.

So we get home, and what do we face? The same-old, same-old! We're tempted to dive right back into the rat race – trying to do everything we're used to doing; trying to juggle all the competing demands; trying to keep everyone as happy as we can. Yes, we sigh, *it was nice spending time with Jesus on the mountain top. Unfortunately, the break is over. Now it's time to work, work, work!* But before we dive back in, we suddenly remember the command: "**Listen to Him.**" So we ask ourselves: *What would that mean in this situation? Right here, right now, what would it mean to really apply Jesus' teachings to our hectic schedule? Teachings like: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these other things will be added to you as well," or "What does it profit to gain the whole world but lose your own soul?" or "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest," or even "With God, all things are possible."* Jesus said quite a bit about setting the right priorities, didn't He? He also said quite a bit about Who to depend on as we tackle our challenges. So...? It may not be easy applying His Word to everyday life, especially when we're stuck in some pretty set patterns, but easy or not, it sure beats making ourselves jump through every hoop the world throws at us, and it's key if we want to experience the abundant life Jesus came to bring us. No, it may not be easy applying Jesus' Word, but it is meant entirely for our benefit. Peter learned this the hard way. We can learn it the right way if we don't just hear Jesus' Word but "**listen to Him.**"

And now, let's go a step further. We get home, and suppose we face more than just busyness. Suppose we face strained relationships, even broken ones. Again, we sigh: *It was so nice to get away from all this up on the mountaintop with Jesus, but...* With our relationships, too, it's the same-old, same-old. And in this case, too, we're tempted to go on like we did before – either acting as if nothing is wrong, or rationalizing why we are right, or nursing an old grudge, maybe even playing "poor-me." But before we dive back into that, again we remember the command: "**Listen to Him.**" And what would that mean in this situation? Right here, right now, what would it mean to really apply Jesus' teachings to our relationships? Teachings like: "**Love one another just as I**

have loved you,” or “If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you...go be reconciled,” or “forgive...not just seven times, but seventy times seven” or even “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you...do good to those who hate you.” Jesus said quite a bit about relationships, too. Specifically, Jesus said quite a bit about forgiveness and how to treat those who hurt us. So...? Here even more it may not be easy applying His Word to everyday life, especially when the hurts are long-standing. But easy or not, it sure beats poisoning our souls with bitterness. It sure beats wasting our time brooding over past hurts that cannot be changed. And it definitely beats blocking the Spirit’s power to work in our lives, because willingness to forgive is also key if we want to experience the abundant life Jesus came to bring us. No, it may not be easy applying Jesus’ Word, but it is meant entirely for our benefit. Peter learned this the hard way. We can learn it the right way if we don’t just hear Jesus’ Word but “**listen to Him.**”

And this is also true in every other area of life. The Word is amazingly complete! There may not be a specific verse for each specific challenge, but there certainly are principles we can apply. In the Gospels and throughout Scripture, there are principles, precepts, and promises, which – as I cannot say too often! – are meant entirely for our benefit. Hard or easy, they are meant to guide and encourage us, strengthen and sustain us, every step of the way. Up here [*head*] we know this. We value the Word. We hear it gladly. But the challenge is to claim the Word, apply the Word, and live the Word. The challenge is to listen.

That is the challenge we take home with us today. As we celebrate this Transfiguration Sunday, we may not take home a vision of glory, but that would soon vanish in any case. We may not take home a feeling of excitement, but long-term that could never sustain us. What we do take home is what’s most important: the challenge *and the invitation*: “**Listen to Him.**” And what could more specific or clear? When Jesus says, “**Follow Me,**” listen to Him! When He says, “**Your sins are forgiven,**” listen to Him! When He says, “**Love your neighbor as your self,**” listen to Him! When He says, “**Because I live, you will live also,**” listen to Him! His Word is amazingly complete, and we can avoid so many mistakes, we can spare ourselves so many regrets, if we don’t just hear Jesus’ Word but “**listen to Him.**” Amen.