

The Last Sunday After the Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: Feb. 27, 2022

Luke 9: 28-36 (37-43a): LISTEN!

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our Gospel reading from Luke, got me to thinking, because sometimes God must wake us up before we can experience God's power. I think that's true for most of us. We need something important to break the cycle of busyness in our lives. We need something transcendent to break the grip of self-centeredness. That's why Jesus spent regular time on his own in prayer.

That's why Jesus took Peter, John and James with him, that day he went to a nearby mountain to pray. The disciples needed to be awakened to Jesus' true identity. They needed to see just a glimpse of his majesty so that when questions and doubts nagged at them, when following his lead became difficult for them, they would remember this moment of awakening and they would find hope and courage for the road ahead.

It reminds me of something that happened to Fyodor Dostoevsky, one of the best-known Russian novelists in history. Dostoevsky was arrested in 1849 for reading banned books. He was sentenced to die by firing squad. But his death sentence was a cruel trick. He was led out into the square to face the firing squad. Then he was blindfolded. The soldiers raised the rifles to their shoulders and fired. But the soldiers fired blanks instead of bullets. It took a few seconds after the sound of gunfire for Dostoevsky to realize that he was still alive. His blindfold was removed. Instead of death, he was sentenced to four years of hard labor in a prison camp. This experience, which was meant to traumatize Dostoevsky, had an awakening effect instead. He became more grateful, more attentive, more alive and joyful than before. He claims that this near-death experience awakened his sensitivities to the world around him in a way that transformed his writing.

Think about it. Have you ever had an awakening experience? When was a time when God broke through your everyday life and became real to you? Was it a conversation with a friend? A verse from the scriptures? A sleepless night? A painful disruption in your life? A moment of pure joy? Or maybe you are still waiting for that experience. Maybe you still aren't sure that you've ever experienced God in a moving and convicting way. That's okay. I'm glad you're here today, and I hope you have an experience in which God

speaks to you or strengthens you or becomes real to you in such a way that it changes your life. And that brings us to the second thing we learn from this scripture: prayer prepares us to experience God. Prayer opens our mind to God's presence and God's will for us.

Jesus took Peter, John and James with him up to a mountain to pray. This was Jesus' regular practice: to go away, often up in the mountains, to pray and spend time with God. As he was praying, Peter, John and James were sleepy. This passage makes me cringe sometimes. Jesus was enjoying the presence of God. Jesus was aligning his mind and his will with his Heavenly Father. Jesus was preparing himself to do the world-changing work of God, while his friends were slipping into nap mode. How many opportunities have I missed to hear God's voice, or to do the good works God set in front of me because I was too lazy to pray? There's a question that will make us all squirm.

A woman named Barbara tells about an incident that happened in her granddaughter's kindergarten class. A boy in the class just wasn't listening to his teacher. The teacher got fed up and said, "Since you don't want to listen, you go sit at that table by yourself." A few minutes passed, and Barbara's granddaughter raised her hand and said, "I don't want to listen either. Can I

sit with him?” The truth hurts. We don’t want to listen either, do we?

Listening to God is not like listening to a friend or a colleague. Listening to God is an act of submission. When we listen to God, we are laying aside our own agenda and priorities and needs and opening ourselves up to the mind and the mission that God has charted out for us.

“The word translated ‘obey’ in the Old Testament means ‘to hear.’ In the New Testament several words describe obedience. One word means ‘to hear or to listen in a state of submission.’ Another word simply translates obey as ‘to trust.’ Our obedient response to God's Word is a response of trust or faith. To really hear God's Word is to obey God's Word.

My brothers and sisters, it is so easy to get stressed out or turned off by the subject of praying. Too many of us have grown up with the belief that there is a “right way” and a “wrong way” to pray. We’ve been taught techniques and rules for praying. I ask you. Would it change your practice of prayer if you thought of it as simply listening to God with an open heart and mind? When I was in the seminary, my class was on a retreat with a well-known Jesuit author who had written many books on prayer and leading us a seminar. During the question-and-answer period, I asked him. “Father, how should I pray?” This noted expert on the subject answered, “It’s very simple. Ask

God.” Instead of judging yourself for your attempts at prayer, just ask God to show you how to pray. Ask God? It’s the simplest way of receiving God’s power. Just ask God to show you how to pray.

I have a high-ranking police detective spent years working in one of the toughest Criminal Investigation units in his city. He was exposed to some atrocious crimes, and the work began to erode his spirit. Eventually, he had an affair which ended his marriage. As he said of this time, “I used to be ten feet tall and bullet proof, and now I am starting to realize that maybe I am not.” One night, while arresting a serial killer, the hardened police detective experienced an urgent need to re-connect with God. He says, “I’ll never forget, I just prayed to the Lord, I emptied my heart to Him, that I needed help, I needed Him. And God showed up. So, in my worst rebellion, when I needed God, I asked for Him and He answered me.” That prayer, and the experience of God’s help and presence, began the healing process in this police detective’s life. Over the next few years, he and his wife reconciled. Eleven years after their divorce, they remarried. Today they run a bed-and-breakfast together. They also share the story of their divorce and reconciliation with other couples who are struggling.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, Isn't that a great description of prayer? “. . . I just prayed to the Lord, I emptied my heart to Him, that I needed help, I needed Him.” Is that the kind of prayer you would feel comfortable praying? More importantly, is that the kind of prayer God will listen to you? Absolutely! So, what do you have to lose?

The final thing we learn from today's Gospel from Luke is that when you experience God, you are called to share that life-changing experience with others. When you experience God, you now carry the life-changing opportunity and responsibility of sharing that experience with others.

On that mountain, Peter, John and James saw God's plan for humanity come together. The great lawgiver, Moses, and the great prophet, Elijah, pointed the nation of Israel to God. But now in Jesus, God had come in human form to share His truth and salvation with all humanity. And just to seal the deal, God spoke from heaven and said, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” That's important. “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”

What did we learn a little earlier about the words used for “listening” in the Bible? That they also imply obedience. Once you hear, you go, and you do.

So why did Peter, John and James keep this wondrous experience to themselves? Because Jesus told them to keep it to themselves. Why? We don't

know, but obviously he had his reasons. And they were simply obeying their Lord.

In Matthew 17, Jesus tells Peter, John and James to keep this moment on the mountain a secret until after Jesus has been raised from the dead. Well, guess what, folks? Jesus has been raised from the dead. It's "after" time! Which means it's time to share the truth of who Jesus is with everyone we can. When you have an experience of God, it's your opportunity and responsibility to share that life-changing experience with others, so that they can know the truth and the hope and the joy and the peace of God that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Albert Schweitzer was a pastor, author, university professor and internationally-known concert organist from Germany. One evening, he read an article about the suffering of people living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Africa. The author of the article wrote, "As I sit here in Africa, it is my prayer that the eyes of someone on whom the eye of God has already fallen will read and be awakened to the call and say, 'Here am I.'" After finishing the article, Albert Schweitzer bowed his head and prayed, "My search has ended; I am coming." He applied to medical school and obtained his license. In 1913, he sailed to French Equatorial Africa where he opened his

first hospital in a converted chicken coop. Over the next four decades, Schweitzer and his wife treated thousands of patients with illnesses such as malaria and leprosy. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953 for his medical mission in Africa. At his death, he was buried on the grounds of his hospital.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, here is the challenge for this week and for your prayer life and for the rest of our lives. We don't get too many mountaintop experiences in life, do we? In my experience at least, we only get a few moments in life when we see or hear the presence and the glory of God right in front of us. It's a life-changing experience. What are we supposed to do with an experience like that? Keep it to ourselves? No. We are called to take the hope, the joy, the truth of that moment and live it out in the valleys. Share it with our neighbors. Let it deepen your commitment to action and service in the name of Jesus Christ. Your mountaintop experience is your opportunity to share the life-changing power of Jesus with others, so they can see the view from the mountain and pass it on to others. As for my prayer life, it was the Hound of Heaven who hunted and haunted me down, until I said from the time I was a boy of 10 when I told my family I wanted to be a priest and when I was ordained to the priesthood at 56. "Ad sum." I am here, Lord and I will go. And I will do." AMEN.