

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday
Sunday, February 14, 2021**

**“And He Was Transfigured”
Mark 9:2-9**

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Sometimes, in the presence of God, all we can do is listen; all we can speak is silence. Sometimes, when God comes close, the only action is no action at all—just stillness and quiet.

Before I was ordained, when I was a student at seminary, I led worship in churches in and around Montreal. The first time I ever preached in a church, about 15 years ago, it was in a village in the Eastern Townships. Now in my Home Church in Montreal, when we sang the standard doxology, we concluded with a long, sustained, musical ‘Am-en’: so, preaching in another church for the first time, I assumed that’s the way they did it, too. The offerings were carried forth, I sang out the doxology loudly, and when it ended, everyone went silent—everyone except me, who all by my lonesome belted out, “Aaaaaaam....” I never quite made it to the second syllable. As the elders looked at me like their guest preacher had perhaps lost his mind, my mistake was clear: the moment called for silence, for stillness, and I missed my cue to be quiet.

Sometimes, when God draws near, there are no words to speak, no tasks to complete: just stillness and silence. When God comes close, we at times need to do something that may not come easily to us: be quiet and be still. Sometimes all we can do when God is near—is stop and listen.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day in the Christian year when the church remembers a stunning event that was witnessed by three disciples: “Six days later,” Mark writes, “Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves” (v. 2).

Now “a high mountain apart” is no ordinary setting. A mountaintop is rich with biblical significance. In Exodus, God speaks to Moses: “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone” (Exodus 24:12). In 1 Kings, Elijah hears: “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by” (1 Kings 19:11). Up the mountain, the air gets thinner, reality gets thicker, and—sometimes—God reveals Godself. So, as the disciples hike up the trails of what’s probably Mount Hermon (Wright), this excursion feels electric with expectation: this mountaintop is prime real estate for revelation.

And, as in some other biblical stories, this climb to the top delivers a view of far more than just the terrain below. Mark describes Jesus this way: “And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them” (vv. 2-3). Jesus is transformed, transfigured, changed—wrapped suddenly in the dazzling glory of God, with a splendour that’s more than Mark can describe. This is a moment for awe, for reverence, for stillness, calling to mind the words of that ancient hymn:

“Let all mortal flesh *keep silence*,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth
our full homage to demand” (Moultrie).

Then, Mark tells us, then “there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus” (v. 4). Wow! This glorious physical transformation was already stunning, yet now Elijah and Moses appear alongside the transfigured Christ. And there’s that captivating detail: Mark writes that Elijah and Moses “were talking with Jesus.” Oh to be a fly on the wall—or a fly on a rock, in this case—for *that* conversation! Jesus, shining in glory, speaks with Elijah and Moses. In this moment, there’s only one thing to do: sit still, and strain to hear every word these three speak. Now is the time to cup your hand to your ear *and listen*.

Peter, however, maybe does not excel at listening. Mark writes: “Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’” (v. 5). Mark adds, almost apologetically, that Peter “did not know what to say, for they were terrified” (v. 6). In this moment, Peter misses the point: Peter injects speech, where only silence belongs—and action, where only stillness has place. Peter here is like that car alarm going off outside during a funeral or a wedding or an ordination—all blaring and urgent and distracting from the very thing that matters.

On this mountaintop, God reveals God’s splendour in Christ, but rather than pause with this revelation, rather than meditate on what God is doing, rather than linger with this life-altering event, Peter skips over about twenty steps and gets right to action: “Alright, Jesus, good job on that Transfiguration: now let’s get busy, let’s get building. We’re gonna need a Funding Campaign, and a Building Committee, and permits from the Mount Hermon Licensing Commission. Who’s gonna volunteer for site selection?” Jesus is still transfigured, still speaking to Moses and Elijah, yet nobody can hear them because Peter’s busy firing up his backhoe.

But then, it seems, God interrupts Peter. Mark writes: “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” (v. 7). In the middle of this revelation, Peter gets chatty—but God’s voice tells him to stop—commanding Peter, and the others, *to listen*. In the original Greek, the command here (that imperative, “listen!”) is plural (ἀκούετε): the command to listen is for all the disciples.

Peter’s mistake here isn’t only that he says the wrong thing; his mistake is that he speaks *at all*. On the Mountain of Transfiguration, in the presence of God’s revelation in Christ, no words belong except *the Word*: it’s not just that Peter suggests building, it’s that he’s speaking and planning and doing when it’s time to be still, to say nothing, to listen intensely, to hang onto the Word like life depends on it. Peter’s babble-lanche betrays an inability to sit still with God, to be silent and listen—and he gets cut off abruptly. Like my lonely choral ‘amen’ in that silent sanctuary in rural Quebec, the moment called for quiet but Peter made noise.

And, maybe partly because of that ill-timed babbling, we are not told in this Gospel account exactly *was* spoken by Jesus, Elijah, and Moses (cf. Luke 9:31). This moment of revelation slips by unheard here, it seems, as Elijah and Moses soon vanish. Mark writes: “Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus” (v. 8). Nevertheless, though perhaps the disciples missed this chance to hear the speech between those three, Jesus still stays near: one opportunity was missed, but God is gracious and stays close and continues to reveal Godself in Christ. As they head down the mountain, Jesus stays with them all.

Peter is really quite bumbling in this story, but his behaviour here is more of a mirror than maybe we realize; in this story, Peter is a lot like us. We mainline Protestants are doers: we’d often rather be hammering than listening. It seems sometimes that we’re happiest when we’re building or renovating or extending something or other. For the most part, we’d rather be doing rather than contemplating... And we also tend to speak when we need to listen to what God is saying: in my experience, Protestants—myself included—really can’t stop

talking. Like Peter, we're not good at remaining silent: we have real trouble sitting silently before God, without the insulating protection of our own verbiage.

We can learn about the importance of silence from Peter's mistake, because—in worship or in prayer or in study or in community—when God reveals God's glory for a fleeting moment, we are also likely to be so busy talking and doing that we miss God's Word. We're more like Peter than we'd like to admit: when God comes close, and silence and stillness are all that belong, we're prone to talk and act and miss the chance to hear what God would speak... Yet this story comes to us as an invitation to listen. The biblical scholar Tom Wright observes: "We don't generally experience things as dramatic as this story. [...] But each of us is called to do what the heavenly voice said: Listen to Jesus, because he is God's beloved Son. And as we learn to listen, even if sometimes we get scared and say all the wrong things, we may find that glory creeps up on us unawares, strengthening us, as it did the disciples, for the road ahead."

If I were preaching on Transfiguration Sunday in another year, I might suggest that the challenge for us is that we need to stop and slow down—which is always a tough sell for hectic, hardworking Protestants. But this year, on Transfiguration Sunday amid a pandemic, that stillness has already been thrust upon us, in many cases: amid the upheaval of the last year, many of you (though certainly not all of you) have been exposed to a new—maybe unprecedented—silence. So the challenge now isn't necessarily to find silence; the challenge is rather to embrace silence to listen for God. In silence, as we read and reflect on Scripture (perhaps on the verses of Psalm 25 that I suggested in my last newsletter article), we can at last listen: the challenge is to make use of these silences, so that—in the silent stillness—we may let our words cease as we listen instead for the Word of Christ.

"Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'" (vv. 2-7).