

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday
Sunday, February 15, 2026**

**“Listen to Him”
Matthew 17:1-9**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

There are moments that call for silence. There are moments, in the presence of God, when we can only quiet our hearts, silence ourselves, and listen. There are moments that call for silence...and yet sometimes, we fail to listen—and fill the silence with sound.

I learned this lesson, rather embarrassingly, the very first time I preached in a church. I had just started seminary when I was invited to lead worship at a rural church in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. Now I had learned to sing the Doxology at my home church in Montreal, where—just as we do here at New St. James—we concluded with a long, sustained “Aaaaaa- men”; and I figured they did that everywhere...

So there I was, leading worship in a church for the first time; the elders were carrying the offerings to the front while I sang the doxology loudly. (As our choir here can attest, what I lack in skill I make up for in volume.) We all sang, “Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost”—then I, and I alone, proceeded to sing “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaam...” As the elders glanced at each other with a look that spoke volumes, my rather embarrassing mistake had illustrated an important lesson: the moment had called for silence, for stillness—but I had 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. Sometimes, when God comes close, we need to do something that may not come very 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, when the church reflects on a stunning event experienced by three disciples. “Six days later,” Matthew writes, “Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves” (v. 1). In the Bible, and in the symbolism of the Bible, mountains are places of revelation—where God’s presence is felt and known. God tells Moses: “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone” (Exodus 24:12). Elijah hears a voice, saying: “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by” (1 Kings 19:11). Up in a mountain, the air gets thinner, reality gets thicker, and—sometimes—God is revealed. So as the disciples hike up what’s possibly Mount Hermon (Wright), this excursion feels electric with expectation: this mountaintop is prime real estate for revelation.

And, just as in other biblical stories, this climb to the top delivers a view of more than just the valley below. Matthew writes: “And [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (v. 2). Somehow—and it’s beyond the Gospel writers’ ability to describe—somehow, Jesus is transformed, transfigured, changed, wrapped suddenly in the dazzling splendour of the glory of God. This is a moment for awe, for reverence, for stillness, calling to mind the words of one 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).

This, in itself, would merit a special Sunday every year in church; yet what comes next turns transfiguration into prelude. Matthews adds: “Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him” (v. 3). Wow! That transformation was already stunning, yet now Elijah (the great prophet) and Moses (the great lawgiver) appear alongside Christ. And did you notice that captivating detail? Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus! In this moment, there is only one thing to do: be still and quiet and strain to hear every word spoken by these three. Now is the moment to cup your hand to your ear—and listen...

Sigh. Then along comes Peter—interrupt-y Peter. You know when you’re watching a movie that you’ve seen a bunch of times before, and the protagonist is about to make a mistake—and you almost wanna reach into the screen to stop them? George Bailey is about to leave that stack of cash with Mr. Potter—and you think, ‘Stop, don’t do it!’ That’s rather how I feel each time I read this passage; as a minister and theologian, I want very much to hear what Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were saying—and so I almost want to reach into the story, ‘No, stop Peter, just be quiet!’ Alas, Peter will not be quiet, as he breaks the silence with well-meaning but misplaced noise. Aaaaaaaaam...

Matthew writes: “Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘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’” (v. 4). In other sermons, I’ve explored the significance of Peter’s speech—his effort to make permanent what was impermanent, his desire to shield Jesus from the dangers to come... But in a sense, Peter’s mistake here isn’t that he said the wrong thing; his mistake is that he said anything at all. Peter injects speech, where only silence belongs—and action, where only stillness has place. It’s like a cell phone going off at an ordination or a wedding, all blaring and urgent and distracting from the very thing that matters.

Next, something happens that is exceedingly rare in Scripture; in fact, I’m not sure if this happens anywhere else in the Bible. While Peter is talking, God interrupts him! Matthew writes: “While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’” (v. 5)—“while he was still speaking”! Again, I don’t think it’s necessarily what Peter was saying, but rather that he was speaking when it was time to be still, to say nothing, to listen intensely, to hang on to every word. And so he gets divinely interrupted; like my lonely ‘amen’ in that silent sanctuary in rural Quebec, the moment called for quiet but Peter made noise.

And as for what was said between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus? We never find out; that moment of revelation slips by unheard, as Elijah and Moses soon vanish: “And when they looked up,” Matthew writes, “they saw no one except Jesus himself alone” (v. 8). That moment is gone, and cannot be recovered.

Nevertheless, though that moment is lost, the divine voice offers another opportunity to hear a life-giving Word: “This is my Son, the Beloved; [...] listen to him!” (v. 5). You might think this was directed solely at Peter; but in the original language, in the Greek, the verb for ‘listen’ is an imperative (a command) in the plural form (ἀκούετε). This is directed not only to Peter, but to all three disciples on the mountain, and—by extension—to all these disciples down the mountain.

Peter comes across as rather bumbling in this story, yet I think his behaviour may be more of a mirror than we maybe realize; I think, in this story, Peter is a lot like us. For many of us, we find it easier to speak than to listen, easier to voice than to hear. And I certainly include myself in this number; really, if you’ve ever spent time with a group of Presbyterian ministers, good luck getting a word in edgewise!

But we can learn from this story; we can learn from Peter's mistakes (and our own), because—in worship or in prayer or in study or in community—when God reveals God's glory for a fleeting moment, we likewise can be so busy talking and doing that we miss God's Word. I think 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...

So this story is for us—and this story comes to us as an invitation to listen. The biblical scholar Tom Wright puts it like this: "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, [...] we may find that [God's] glory creeps up on us [unexpectedly], strengthening us, as it did the disciples, for the road ahead."

"While [we are] still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadow[s] [us], and from the cloud a voice sa[ys], "This is my Son, the Beloved; [...] listen to him!" Amen.