

A sermon preached on February 27th, 2022 – Transfiguration Sunday – based upon Luke 9:28-36 entitled, "The Necessity of Prayer."

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.

They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" -- not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. (Luke 9:28-36)

Last week I said that before it is a set of teachings, the Gospel is a story. At the heart of this story is the invitation to enter into an intentional relationship with God, through Jesus.

The Gospel writer Luke tells this story in ways that have a lot in common with how Mark and Matthew tell their story, but one distinction of his telling is the emphasis he puts on prayer. He describes what I suspect Mark and Matthew simply assume we understand – which is that Jesus spent a great deal of time in prayer. For instance, in the story of Jesus' baptism which we heard early on in the season of Epiphany, in contrast to Mark and Matthew, Luke tells us that it was after Jesus was baptized while he was sitting on the riverbank praying that he heard the voice of God say, "You are

the beloved son, in whom I am well pleased” and experienced the Holy Spirit descend upon him like a dove.

We hear that early in Jesus’ ministry when his healing miracles began drawing large crowds of people, Jesus “would withdraw to deserted places to pray” (5:16) – the implication being that the clamor of the crowds – the rock star adoration – the resulting headiness that can come from being a worldly “success” had the potential to distract him from his path. He needed to counter this distraction by intentionally reconnecting to God in prayer.

Luke tells us that Jesus spent a night in prayer before calling his twelve disciples, and that it was in the midst of prayer in the passage that immediately preceded this morning’s reading that Jesus decided it was finally time to tell his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer – to be rejected by the religious authorities and die.

And in this morning’s story we call the Transfiguration – found in Matthew, Mark and Luke – only Luke tells us that Jesus specifically went up the mountain in order to pray – which again, I suspect Matthew and Mark probably assumed was obvious.

In this case there was something specific that leads Jesus to pray – and it is connected to why “Transfiguration Sunday” occurs right before we begin the season of Lent. The trip to the cross is about to begin. It’s as though Jesus is entering a frightening hurricane and at the outset he finds the eye of the hurricane – the place of eternal stillness beyond the violent winds.

As he prays, Jesus experiences the reality of the resurrection – that which he will encounter on the far side of his suffering and death. The brilliant light that shines forth from Jesus is an indication that during this experience he briefly inhabits his “resurrection body” – the mystery of his earthly, perishable body transfigured into the eternal.

This experience of prayer will sustain Jesus on the hard, hard journey that will follow. So, in this morning’s reading we get a glimpse of the importance of Jesus’ prayer life, but what happens up on that mountaintop is also designed to be instructive to the disciples and to you and me.

Midway through the story, the attention turns to Peter. With the glory of God present on that mountaintop in such an unveiled manner, Peter has a curious response: words start pouring out of his mouth. He's got ideas about what should happen next – booths to build – altars to memorialize this dramatic moment. He babbles on – and Luke makes a point of telling us Peter really had no idea what he was saying.

Now, it would be accurate to say that what Peter is doing at this moment is praying. He is, after all talking to Jesus. It is in prayer that we intentionally embrace our relationship with God, and as such it is appropriate to put into words whatever happens to be going on at the moment in our head and heart. Sometimes, as is the case here with Peter the words we will speak in prayer will be pretty chaotic.

Sometimes the words we address to God will express our least flattering self. You see this sort of thing all the time in the psalms – the psalmist expressing resentment, despair, a desire for vengeance – an honest portrayal of where they are at the moment. As our story proceeds however, we recognize that speaking words is not the whole of prayer.

Something occurs that shuts Peter's mouth. Suddenly all the light which a moment ago had shown so brilliantly is eclipsed by a cloud that overshadows them on that mountaintop. Thrust into utter darkness, Peter's babbling about the plans he has is stopped short.

In the silence that follows, the voice of God is heard -- words that echo what Jesus had heard at the riverbank following his baptism, but this time words clearly addressed not to Jesus but to Peter and the other disciples. "This is my Son, my Chosen; ***listen to him!***"

So, the broad point here is that prayer is really important and that it involves more than talking. Prayer includes listening. Within this broad point, I'd like to focus on to narrower points:

First, that silence is necessary to listen well.

Second, it's important to get clear regarding whose voice we are listening for.

I want to elaborate these two points, and as I do tell you about two women connected to our church in whom I've witnessed a deepening of prayer in a way that has born tangible fruits in their lives. A few you may recognize who it is I'm talking about -- they will go unnamed here -- but I'm sure they would be willing to talk to you about their experience.

The first woman's story involves the need for silence and stillness in order to listen in prayer.

The problem with silence is that to varying degrees, silence and stillness frankly don't come easy to us. Silence can be uncomfortable -- even frightening. This is in part what Peter's babble of words express. The silence on that mountaintop frightens him -- he feels compelled to fill the silence with his own words.

But how can we listen if we're busy talking?

The woman I have in mind has regularly attended the guided meditation and prayer sessions I lead on Zoom on Wednesday and Thursday. This may sound like an advertisement for those session, but my primary point here is to talk about the challenge of silence.

She described how she initially entered these sessions very reluctantly because sitting still in silence had always been very difficult for her.

I think that to some degree silence is a challenge for all of us, but nonetheless people vary in regard to the extent that this is true. This has to do with two things:

The first is that the brains of some of us are simply wired in such a way that analyzing problems is our default position, making silence challenging. Our minds find it particularly hard not to go towards our problems in an attempt to solve them.

The second reason has to do what we've experienced in life -- specifically the kinds of trauma we have experienced. For some of us, silence provides a space where the pain of our wounds can come to the surface, and understandably we avoid silence so as to avoid that pain.

For both these reasons the woman found silence very hard. Silence would just give her mind opportunity to run wild, going to all those things in life that were cause for worry – and to painful feelings as well.

But she was willing to give my meditation sessions a try.

In the sessions I lead, I begin with a brief prayer. For the next 25 minutes I talk softly and slowly. I lead people through a process of attending to their breath and to tightening and relaxing muscles in order to hopefully reach a deeper level of relaxation. I invite people to imagine Jesus -- imagine the light of God's love-light glimpsed on that mountaintop pouring down from his hands resting on the top of their heads.

The point here is that for 25 minutes we don't actually have true silence – there is my voice – and the hope is that during this time peoples' minds will quiet down some.

Finally, for five minutes we enter together silence for five minutes. Hopefully the preparation time, along with the fact that we are doing this not alone but together makes the silence more tolerable.

This was the case for this woman who for the first time in her life found the silence not only tolerable – but to some degree even pleasant – her mind quiet and calm in a way that felt gracious. It was subtle but significant change for her – this awareness beyond words that God was present with her in the silence. What she experienced carried over to the rest of her life as a slight diminishing of the anxiety that routinely played in the background of her mind. The words of Psalm 46 made sense to her in a new way: "Be still and know that I am God."

I want to turn now to the second point – the necessity of getting clear regarding whose voice it is we are listening for in the silence.

In our Gospel story, Peter initially puts Jesus on equal status with Moses and Elijah – in his mind a major affirmation of Jesus' authority. But after the cloud casts them into utter darkness and silence, and the voice of God is heard saying, "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him," when the cloud passes Moses and Elijah are no longer on the mountaintop. Clearly, the point is being made that Jesus is the one to listen to. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is value

in reading all parts of the Bible, but we do so through the lens of Jesus. Where something contradicts the Spirit of Jesus, we go with Jesus.

It's important to familiarize ourselves with Jesus as he is presented in the Gospels so we can recognize what harmonizes with his voice, and what doesn't.

In the course of sitting in silence, it is possible we might hear a voice offering us some sort of direction. How can we tell if the voice comes from God? Emotional disturbance can produce voices in our head as well. Well, if we have become familiar with the Spirit of Jesus, we can make some kind of discernment as to whether what the voice is telling us is in harmony with Jesus.

Some people ask whether they should pray to God or to Jesus. It doesn't really matter as long as we understand that the heart of God is revealed in Jesus. Since we human beings know relationships primarily in terms of people, it can be helpful as we do in the guided meditation sessions to picture Jesus as the one to whom we are praying.

Which brings me to the second woman. A couple of years ago she was given a book of daily devotions that encouraged the reader to intentionally pray to Jesus. She liked the book, but it was only in the past year that she decided to take the concept very seriously – to make her daily time of prayer with the book the centerpiece of her day. Slowly she found herself developing mental habits that would carry out into the rest of her day: whenever she was aware of some distress – for instance, anxiety or sadness – inwardly she would turn to Jesus and tell him about what she was experiencing. Positive things as well.

As with the first woman I mentioned she noticed overtime that the energy she was investing in her prayer life was having a subtle but significant impact on her life. Like many of us with sensitive natures, this woman was prone to anxiety and depression. This habit of talking specifically to Jesus when life became challenging kept her from spiraling done into a deep darkness. She could allow herself to feel sad – life involves times which -- if our hearts aren't hardened – feelings of grief and sadness arise – but for this woman the feelings of sadness were less likely to lead her into the deadening of spirit that is full blown depression.

What do we know about Jesus from the Gospels? We know that he doesn't turn away anyone who comes to him with sincerity of heart. His words of judgment were reserved for the self-righteous, the hypocritical. But for the soul that cries out in humility, "Lord, have mercy!" Jesus always responds with grace and love. When we feel like we as though we are unlovable, he nonetheless loves us.

Jesus doesn't mean to leave us in the mess that our lives often appear to us to be. He is, after all the one who commands us to love like God. But Jesus knows that love grows in our hearts not through condemnation, but with through a love that meets us where we are.

So we are about to enter into the season of Lent, a traditional time of prayer and repentance – which means a turning towards God. The experience of these two women testify to the possibility that with intentional effort with our prayer life, combined with the grace of God revealed to us in Jesus significant change is possible. Perhaps you could take Lent as an opportunity to follow this same path.

Jesus went to the mountaintop to pray as he entering the violent winds of this sin-sick world that meant he would sacrificially lay down his life on the cross. We find ourselves entering the season of Lent as a war has broken out in Ukraine that leaves us all feeling unsettled, wondering where the violence will lead.

As Jesus found the eye of the hurricane that is the stillness of God's eternal love, so we are called the peace which is deeper than all the violence. What the world needs from us now is to embody that peace rather than to be filled with the world's anxiety and violence. In doing so, hope is found.