

Building a church is complicated. There are the people, there's the place, and there's the program. Leadership, physical resources, music, teaching, preaching, and outreach are all essential components. And you need a Bible. That's the foundation for everything else. God the Father commanded Jesus' disciples to "**Listen to him!**" This morning we're going to talk about what that command means for us in our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 17:1-9

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. ⁴Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Do not be afraid." ⁸When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Do not tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Jesus took three of his 12 disciples on a hike up a mountain. I can imagine they hitched up their cloaks as they grunted up the hillside. A rabbit peered at them as they passed by, maybe a squirrel too. A deer crossed their path and looked at them quizzically. Perhaps the three talked among themselves, or maybe not. I imagine Peter—a bigger man than the others—huffing and puffing wondering why no one brought lunch, and James thinking this was a waste of time, and John examining every blossom of every flower along the way.

And they came to the top of the mountain, and they peered into the valley below. There was Nazareth, not far. On the horizon was the Mediterranean. They spun around, and there was the Dead Sea. Great view.

And then Jesus **“was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (v.2)**. And that’s when the disciples started paying attention.

That’s why this happened.

Jesus had been trying to get these guys to focus for a long time. You can almost hear him: Stick with me; listen; follow my lead; Peter, stop talking! Now they were paying attention.

With Christ’s transfiguration I’m reminded of how when angels show up in the Bible, light shines from them like glow sticks, except brighter; I’m reminded of how Israel saw a great light when the Lord came among them; or how after speaking with the Lord, Moses’ face shone so brightly, the people could not look at him and he wore a veil.

Peter, James, and John had plenty of reasons to pay attention. They knew God was doing something.

God is always trying to get our attention. Perhaps he speaks to us in our grief for a loved one who has died, and we confront our own mortality and take hold of his promise of eternal life in a personal way. Maybe a friend has the courage to speak truth to us, and we’re humbled, and we realize we need to make amends and ask for forgiveness for a wrong we’ve committed. Perhaps our eyes are opened amidst our chaos and we realize we must take responsibility for what we have done.

We read that upon Christ’s transfiguration, **“there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus” (v.3)**. Don’t you wonder what they talked about? I do. Matthew wasn’t at the event, but he wrote about it. So who told him what happened? John wrote his own Gospel, and he didn’t record the event. And James, the first of the 12 disciples to be martyred, died before Matthew wrote his Gospel. So that leaves Peter, who mentioned the Transfiguration in his second

letter (2nd Peter 1:16-18). What this tells me is that Peter was still not paying attention because he wasn't listening to what Moses and Elijah and Jesus were talking about!

One of the biggest challenges in communications is listening.

What did he say?

That's what I'm talking about: Some of you were thinking about the factoid I just shared about how James was the first of the 12 to be martyred. Others were thinking, I wonder what Peter said about the Transfiguration in his second letter. And still others were thinking, I hope Pastor doesn't go long because I'm starving!

Listening: Peter wasn't listening to the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. He was thinking about how he would respond. Ever do that? "I get to talk next, so what will I say when this person's lips stop moving?"

Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah, and Peter jumped in and said, "**Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah**" (v.4). Peter wasn't listening because when he saw Moses and Elijah, he immediately thought God's Kingdom had come! His mind raced.

The "**three shelters**" would've been temporary dwelling places just like the ones the Jews had been putting up every year since the days of Moses. This was how they remembered that they had wandered homeless in the Wilderness for 40 years, but the Lord had provided for their every need, nonetheless. This was called the Feast of Booths. Jews celebrate this feast even now, putting up shelters in their yards where they pray and read Bible stories about God's provisions during their wanderings so long ago.

So when Peter saw Moses and Elijah talking to Christ, he remembered how the prophet Zechariah wrote that when God comes to judge the nations, the faithful will celebrate the Feast of Booths, giving thanks to God for his deliverance as he pours his wrath down on their enemies (Zechariah 1:16-18).

That's what Peter was thinking as he stared mesmerized by what he saw. "I'll build shelters for you guys—heck, we'll build shelters for ourselves too—and we'll make some popcorn, and get some Diet Cokes, and we'll watch from right here on this mountain as God pours down fire and brimstone on the Romans! Go God!"

I like it. But God did not. We read that **"While (Peter) was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!' 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified"** (vv.5-6). This got Peter's attention, and James and John's too. They remembered God's **"bright cloud"** from the stories of the Exodus, how it covered Mt. Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments, how it guided the people during the daytime through the Wilderness, and how it settled over the Tabernacle when the Lord was present. We read that when Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, when the Ark of the Covenant was set inside the Holy of Holies, **"the cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD"** (1st Kings 8:10-11).

The disciples were **"terrified."** Did you notice that Peter was still talking when God's cloud and voice came? The Lord spoke right over the top of him: Peter, it's time to stop talking.

There are times when we need to stop talking too. Sometimes we should listen. If we spent less time talking and more time listening, the world would be a quieter place. And that's the truth.

So the disciples were all ears now. Facedown on the ground is a good position for listening; it's the most humble position; it's the most vulnerable position; there are no distractions, nothing but dirt in the face and ears perked up for further instruction.

In the previous chapter, Jesus had been quizzing all 12 disciples about his identity. He asked them, **"Who do you say that I am?"** Peter heard the question and he nailed the answer. He said, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God"** (Matthew 16:15-16). But then in the next paragraph the Lord explained that because he was the Christ, he would go to Jerusalem, where he would suffer and die and rise from the grave on the third day. But this time Peter wasn't listening,

and he said, **“God forbid it, Lord! This can never happen to you!”** And Jesus said to him, **“Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of man”** (Matthew 16:22-23).

Peter had a hard time with the listening part of communications. But maybe that changed when God the Father proclaimed from the cloud, **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased”** (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). Hey, I’ve heard those words before, he thought. That’s what the Lord said at Jesus’ baptism three years ago.

When God the Father made that proclamation, that’s when Peter and the others hit the ground face-first. They saw it at that moment: They knew Moses and Elijah had met with God on a mountain top in days of old (Exodus 24 & 34; 1st Kings 19), that the Lord had encouraged them in those meetings. And here Moses and Elijah were again meeting with the Lord—Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, clothed in light from above. And as before, Jesus was encouraging them, perhaps consoling them with words about his coming redemption of Israel and the world, a message which echoed their own words from so many years earlier.

After Moses and Elijah disappeared, Jesus said to the disciples, **“Get up”** and, **“Do not be afraid.”** ⁸**(And) when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.** ⁹**As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Do not tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’”** (vv.7-8).

We know how this story ends: that Peter doesn’t really get it yet, that he denied knowing Jesus as he went to the Cross. But we also know that he did get it eventually, that he put it all together, that he finally understood the necessity of Jesus’ crucifixion, that without his suffering and death, there could be no forgiveness of sins, and that without the forgiveness of sins, there was only judgment, and with judgment came hell, darkness, and eternal separation from God.

When Jesus told the disciples about how he would suffer and die in the previous chapter, he also told them that they too would bear their own crosses, that anyone who would be his follower would die to himself and follow him (Matthew

16:24-26). But the disciples were not prepared to hear this message at the time; it stung their ears; it was abhorrent; it was heinous. Thus the need to reveal Christ's divinity in the Transfiguration with his face which "**shone like the sun**" and the cloud of light which enveloped them.

The prophet Isaiah wrote that "**The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them**" (Isaiah 9:2).

And Jesus said, "**I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life**" (John 8:12).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week let us walk in Christ's light. We know the truth, and it has set us free from the darkness, from the lies of the world. We know to whom we belong; our Savior lives, and in his life we have found our own lives.

This week in this new life, in Christ's love, in his light let us listen to our Lord: He said that we are saved because of his suffering and death on the Cross, so let us rejoice! But he also said that because we've chosen to walk with him, we will have our own crosses to bear. The world hates the light we follow after, and the devil hates it too, and even my sinful nature isn't crazy about it either! So fight, fight, fight! And listen to Jesus.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of the Lord. Amen.