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Festival of the Transfiguration – Matthew 17:1-9 – Listen When God Speaks  
2/19-23/20 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

Jesus must have thought sometimes that speaking to his disciples was like speaking to a wall. What he said usually didn't seem to stick or it went right over their heads. Six days before Jesus' Transfiguration on a high mountain was another mountaintop event, so to speak. Peter and the other disciples boldly confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, and Jesus replied, "You're absolutely right, and here's what that means..." and he told them that being the Christ meant suffering and dying for the sins of the world.

But then Peter stopped him. Nothing Jesus had said to him, nothing Peter had seen had sunk in. "No, that can't be right!" Peter objected. He had his own ideas about the Christ, wrong as they were, and he didn't want to hear anything else. Jesus couldn't die! That just didn't make sense! But he wasn't listening to what Jesus was saying. Taking up the cross was the *only* way to save humanity from their sins. But the story wouldn't end with Jesus' death.

That's why six days later, Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a high mountain to witness his Transfiguration. It was all about assurance, and Jesus' message on that mountaintop was the same for them as it is now for us who have the same struggles – no matter how bleak it looks or how much you might doubt it sometimes, victory is coming. Don't just hear Jesus' words and not take them to heart. Listen when God speaks about his plan, about his person, and about his purpose, because what he's telling you changes everything.

So Jesus brought his inner circle of disciples with him up the mountain that day so they could be alone. He had to show them something that wasn't ready just yet for public consumption, but they needed to see it before they saw Jesus beaten and bloody and hanging on a cross. There he was transfigured before them, when in light as blinding as the sun and dazzling splendor as bright white as a flash of lightning he revealed his glory as true God that he'd been hiding behind his human flesh since he came into this world. And if that sight wasn't enough to behold, all of the sudden the ancient prophets Moses and Elijah appeared along with him there to speak with Jesus about what was going to happen to him.

Can you imagine that? Those were maybe the two most towering prophetic figures in the Old Testament. These were legends that the disciples had been learning about since their childhood. And here as they listened in, they found that they all shared the same faith in the same Messiah. Jesus was the object of their faith and that of every believer all throughout the Old Testament. What Moses and Elijah believed and taught in their time was in total agreement with everything that was unfolding before their very eyes. It was God's plan all along that Jesus should come into this world and die for the sins of all people, and what he

was about to do was the culmination of all the hopes of his people – Moses, Elijah, and everyone else – since the beginning of time. The disciples were there to witness this for a reason – so they could listen and believe!

All along the Scriptures had pointed to Jesus. The disciples were not left without witnesses. From the beginning of time, God used men like Moses and Elijah to bring his Gospel message to the world, just like he does now through the teaching of the disciples. That means God hasn't left us without witnesses, either. We have the same Scriptures that testify to Jesus from the first page to the last. We have the same eye-witness testimony of God's glory in Jesus. And that means we too can have total assurance that everything that happened to Jesus was part of God's plan – he was in total control the whole time, even when he was suffering and dying. This was God's plan all along, to make sure we have a place at home in heaven with him someday. So do like the disciples were supposed to. Listen when God speaks!

Yes, it was certainly good for the disciples to be there. Who among sinful humanity was ever so blessed to see and hear something like that? They were so overwhelmed – so excited and at the same time so frightened – that they didn't even know what to say. So Peter, like normal, just blurted out the first thing that came to his mind: "*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.*" They didn't want this moment to end – to them it was heaven on earth! – but the cloud that came and enveloped them signaled that it must.

The disciples still just didn't get it. Even when they heard Jesus speaking with the prophets, they didn't really *listen*. Same old Peter. Six days ago he tried to talk Jesus out of going to the cross, and here again, innocently enough, he does the same. He still didn't understand that this was going to happen – that it *had* to happen. They couldn't all stay there with Jesus, as wonderful and appealing as that sounds – because in this sinful life, there is no such thing as heaven on earth. No, Jesus had a job to do, and it was winning their salvation so one day they could go to heaven! But first, they had to leave that mountain top and go to Mount Calvary. Jesus had to lay down that glory once more and humble himself to death.

And when God the Father spoke from that cloud, he left no doubt that Jesus was just the person to do the job. Jesus left his throne in heaven to take on human flesh so that he could be everything he needed to be in order to save us from our sins. He's the one who speaks God's own Word and does God's own Will. When God the Father rang out, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!*" That was his ultimate seal of approval on Jesus as His Son and our Savior.

When God speaks to us about the person of Jesus, we should listen. I mean, we hear every week in church that Jesus didn't just come to make things better for us in this life. No, he had

a much greater purpose for us than simply turning this world into a utopia, and we see that all the time all around us when things get worse instead of better. But lots of times we can be just as slow to learn as the disciples were. When things start to go south spiritually and physically, do you blame God, or accuse him of doing you wrong? Do you doubt that Jesus will really do anything about your problems, or that he even can? Don't you see how you're blinding your eyes to the glory that he revealed just for you in times like these?

Listen to the Father speak about Jesus – who he really is, what he really came to do, and what that really means for us now. See how much your God loves you, that he was willing to humble himself to suffer and die to win life for you forever! He walked the path of the cross because he loves you that much. He gave up everything so that he could be your Savior.

And now as we walk the same path of suffering in this sinful world, we can have the same confidence as the disciples. Jesus is true, almighty God – he proved it there on that mountain! So don't ever think that he doesn't have the power or the care to help you out of your problems or your sufferings, because he certainly does. But he also has the love and wisdom to know what's best for us and for our relationship with him, and if that means he doesn't fix our problems right now, then he will surely give us the strength to live under our crosses until he finally brings us home to himself. Sometimes we might not get the way God works and that's okay, because we know the heart of our Savior. And like the disciples, we will understand one day when we see him in his unveiled glory in heaven.

When that cloud appeared and that voice rang out, it all became just too much. The disciples fell flat on their faces, completely terrified, completely overloaded. But then just as suddenly, there was a calm. The familiar voice and familiar face of Jesus comforted them, but you have to think maybe with a smile and a wink. Could they ever look at Jesus the same way again, knowing what kind of glory was hidden in his flesh? Jesus' transfiguration was meant to be a great comfort and assurance to them, so they would know that their constant companion and most beloved friend was in fact glorious God, even and especially when he was being tortured and killed. They had to know that their discipleship wasn't meaningless and Jesus wasn't powerless, but that he had a purpose.

But yet still, the disciples just didn't understand. So that's why as they were coming down the mountain Jesus said to them, "*Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.*" Now what exactly was *that* supposed to mean? Well, the disciples may not have gotten anything that happened on that mountain or even before then, and they wouldn't really understand what was going to happen to Jesus soon, either. But if there was one clear thing that Jesus did want them to take from this, it was that what was about to happen to him wouldn't mark him as some would-be leader-of-men reject. It would mark him as their victorious Savior and King. That one clear thing, that one sure promise he

made that was backed up by the rock-solid testimony of the prophets and the Father himself, was that Jesus was not going to stay dead. Yes, Jesus would suffer and die like the worst of criminals, but *listen* when God speaks – there is a resurrection coming. That was his purpose.

And he speaks that to us today as well. See, we've all had our spiritual mountaintop experiences when God's power and glory are unmistakable in our lives – times when we can see so clearly God's hand working to bless us or when God uses us to bring his Word to someone who needs it. But we never stay on that mountaintop. As long as we live in this sinful world, we're always going to have our valleys, too. Life's going to fall apart. People are going to mock or reject or ignore what we say and believe. Sin's going to rear its ugly head in any number of ways. We may never stay on the mountaintop, but we always remember it, we always cherish it, and we always cling to its promises for dear life.

The Transfiguration was meant to prepare the disciples for what was coming, for Jesus' arrest and for everything that would follow. And that's why we celebrate this festival now too, because it prepares us for Lent. But it also prepares us for life because we have crosses to bear, too. The Transfiguration teaches us that our worship and our relationship with God isn't about the feelings of our hearts – it's about the truth of God's promises. So even when your life looks like it's crashing down around you, remember who your Savior is, what he did for you, and the power he promises to employ for your good. Take to heart how much he loves you, and the heaven that awaits you when you'll see him in glory. Everything that happens to us in this sinful world should make us long for that that much more. Yes, Jesus suffered and died, but he rose victorious. The Transfiguration assures us that he would, and it assures us also now that no matter what we have to go through, even if we have to suffer and die like Jesus and the disciples did, our resurrection to eternal life is coming one day, too.

But it would be about six months yet before the disciples would really get that. In fact, things would get worse as Jesus approached his suffering and death. The disciples would continue to stumble, even fall. But then Jesus rose. That changed everything, and they never forgot it. Over 35 years later, as Peter faced his own death, he found strength in what he saw on that mountaintop as he wrote the words we heard in our second lesson for today: "*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... We ourselves heard the voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place*" (2 Pt. 1:16, 18-19). And still now the message the disciples needed to hear is the one they left to echo for you: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and our Savior, no matter how it might look sometimes, and he will not be denied his victory or your salvation. So friends, listen when God speaks: "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!*" Amen.