

Listening Matters

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2 Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9

Introduction

Today we are looking at a couple of the “amazing” stories – the story of Elijah riding up into heaven with a chariot and horses, and Peter, James and John hitting the slopes, so to speak, with Jesus.

This mountain event was significant – this is a signal to “pay attention.” In the Ancient Near East, mountains were special places. Partly this was based on their understanding of the world and God: mountains were high, so high that they were thought to be nearer the heavenly firmament where God lived. They were also crucial to the ecology of the region. Water that was needed for agriculture and for settlements came from the mountains. Without that water, the ancient civilizations would have never come to be. And yet, because mountains were where God lived, it was also understood that mountains were not places for human beings – too cold, too stark, no way to find enough food.

The writer of Mark deliberately plays on the Exodus story of Moses receiving the teachings and commandments from God at Mount Sinai. This is big stuff. But where is the special revelation from God that will come from “on high”? For all the visual fireworks going on with Elijah and Moses appearing, and Jesus’ clothes turning white, and the cloud covering the top of the mountain, the root message coming from the voice out of the cloud is “Jesus is my beloved Son. Listen to him!”

The first part was already told to us readers of the gospel at Jesus’ baptism. The second part? Listen to Jesus? That’s the big thing God had in mind here? My first reaction is, “What kind of revelation is *that*?” We’re meant to identify with the disciples were probably agog at all the happenings, but you wonder whether the real message – listen to this guy that you’re following, the one who just told you that terrible things will be happening soon – was not the kind of message the disciples, and us as the readers/hearers, had in mind. Where are the 10 commandments like with Moses? Or the sound of sheer silence that Elijah experienced?

Peter’s reaction shows that at least one person didn’t think that either – at least in the story. Peter immediately offers to build tents, or tabernacles, as a way of making a “nice” church. I can hear his wheels turning, trying to find something to do because

what he hears is not fitting in with his worldly point of view. Stay up on the mountain, worship Elijah, Moses and Jesus, is his way of responding to God.

And yet the message is to listen. This is something that the disciples haven't done very well. Earlier in chapter 4 of the gospel, Jesus has made this demand as well, saying, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen! Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get. . ." (Mark 4:23-25) But nobody did – the man with leprosy in chapter 1 hadn't listened, the disciples in the last chapter were sullenly silent at Jesus' claim that while he was the messiah, there was suffering in their future. Maybe this message on the mountain is really important after all.

As humans, we have trouble listening to messages that are outside our comfort zone.

I once heard author and physician Rachel Naomi Remen speak about a young man that she was asked to verify had a spontaneous remission of cancer. As a young boy, he'd been diagnosed with bone cancer. All the doctors at the time wanted to amputate his leg, but he refused, and returned from the East Coast to Idaho where he lived. Other than the prayers of his church, he never had any treatment, and was still alive 21 years later.

Remen tracked down his physician on the East Coast – he'd been a young man at the time. She recounted their conversation:

"I've always been haunted by that case," the doctor confessed.

"Do you by any chance still have the medical report on this young man?" she asked.

"I guess you are calling for his family, right?" he responded.

"No, I'm calling on his behalf," she said/

"Oh, I'm so glad that he had the surgery after all. Where was it?"

"He never had any surgery."

Silence. Then the doctor hung up the phone. And would never return any of Remen's subsequent phone calls. It was just too scary.

On the mountain, Jesus had brought the key leaders of his movement, Peter, James and John. They would be the leaders after his death, they would need to be able to speak, but they also needed to be able to listen to God as well as the people. Here, the most trusted ones of Jesus, are told to listen. And it is beyond them, because to listen to Jesus would mean that their world would change in ways that they did not understand, and therefore feared.

Listen to him. Could it be that listening is the most important thing for our Christian lives, beyond even believing? Would it be heresy to say that our ability to listen to God

is more important than even what we believe?

Listening for Call

The measure you give in listening is the measure you get. For those of us who like our air time need to remember that those who don't speak up often may have something very important to offer the group. As Winston Churchill said, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

What does listening for God really require? For one, it requires letting someone or something speak, even silence. It's no accident that the word that has to do with following God's will is named "call" in our tradition. God can call all God wants, but until one is willing to listen, it will go unheeded.

Many of us enter conversations with the idea forming of what we will say next, even in our prayer time. As Steven Covey, the organizational consultant puts it, "People don't listen to understand. They listen to reply. The collective monologue is everyone talking and no one listening.

Listening therefore involves hearing the things we like and also the things that disturb us, that might challenge our understanding of our world and God. Listening involves being so attuned to another that we are able to understand what we might find changes us, pulls the life that we have created down to the foundations so that something else might get created. Here's what Joe Bruchac, a Native American storyteller says,

"The central themes in my work are simple ones - that we have to listen to each other and to the earth,...we have to respect each other and the earth, [and]we never know anyone until we know what they have in their heart," he adds.

Listening to God today in Community

Listening for what is true, listening for what is sacred is such important business. Mr. Rogers, the Presbyterian pastor who was probably millions of children's best friend for years, was a master at letting things unfold in their own pace, and really listening to each person that he came into contact with. He recounted several years ago his experience of visiting the White House. He was one speaker on the subject of children and television, and had the honor of sitting next to Mrs. Clinton on the dais. But his most vivid memory was after the event was over, as he was leaving the enormous room, he spied a military guard, dressed in gold and white, who whispered softly, "Thanks, Mr. Rogers."

Fred Rogers remembered the response when he asked him, "Thanks for what?" The

young man replied:

Well, sir, as I listened to you today, I started to remember my grandfather's brother. I haven't thought about him in years. I was only seven when he died, but just before that, he gave me his favorite fishing rod. I've just been thinking, maybe that's why I like fishing so much and why I like to show the kids in my neighborhood all about it.

For Rogers, this was the shining moment of his trip – he called it “a marvelous mystery.”¹ The fact is, Rogers was very aware that the eternal comes to us in many forms, including in our neighbors. When we show our appreciation, when we come in touch with the ones near us, we can be transformed too.

A Time to be Thankful

And now I'd like to give you something that Mr. Rogers gave when he delivered speeches: the gift of time to remember, in silence, those who nourish you at the deepest part of your being . . . anyone who has ever loved you and wanted what was best for you in life. Some of those people may be right here today. Some may be far away, some may even be in heaven; but if they've encouraged you to come closer to what you know to be essential about life, I'd like you to have a silent minute to think of them.

One minute: I'll watch the time. . .

Whomever you've been thinking about: just imagine how grateful they must be that you're remembering them with such thanksgiving. If it is someone that you are still able to contact, I encourage you to send a note or make a phone call. . .just to make sure they know you appreciate them.

Because, friends, listening matters.

Amen.

1 Fred Rogers, Marquette University, May 20, 2001.