

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 23, 2020

(Matthew 17:1-9)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

Yesterday was one of those rare days when my calendar was completely free: no appointments; no errands; no rush to get anything done. It's always nice to have times when Amy and I can sit together before the girls wake up, drinking a cup of coffee and talking or catching up on the news. As we spent some quiet time together, thoughts about what direction this morning's sermon might take floated around my head, and I was trying to give the Holy Spirit space to nudge me on the way those thoughts should come together.

Admittedly there's been a great deal in the past few days that made the process difficult. Chaos in the world; divisiveness in the country; illness; trauma; grief; sorrow in the lives of some of my family and friends. Turning on the Saturday morning news didn't help, as just a few minutes with the back-and-forth seemed to push the ideas that were gently floating around into an uncontrollable swirl.

The figure at the center of this "idea storm," Jesus, remained constant. I realized that my struggle was in trying to work from the outside in, moving through the uncontrolled torrent of ideas towards the center. In fact, what I needed to be doing was starting at the center and working outwards, using that point of inner stability to help give shape and form to the outside. When I did that, three particular thoughts came into focus. It's those three that I'd like to offer this morning.

First, we are called to ***listen***. The necessity of listening for God is something I've touched on often, even as recently as last week when I talked about the section of Deuteronomy – the Shema – that begins, "***Hear***, O Israel." I've offered examples of many moments throughout the scriptures when there has been the presence of a ***gap*** ... moments of silence into which God's voice speaks. This morning, however, we experience something new. God doesn't wait for the silence to develop; God ***interrupts***. Listen again to this verse from Matthew: ***While he*** [Peter] ***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!***'"¹

Remember that this isn't the first time God proclaimed this. In the third chapter of this same gospel, we hear God speak at Jesus' baptism: "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"² When God says something – ***anything*** – one time,

¹ Matthew 17:5 (NRSV).

² Matthew 3:17 (NRSV).

we know it's important. How much more important is it then, and how much more are we being called to absorb and remember it, when it is said **twice**?

This isn't a command to ease back on conversation and wait for a gap. This is God telling them to **be quiet**. *Here is my Son; he is a source of great joy to me ... and he has something to say. Listen!* Of course the three disciples who had followed Jesus up the mountain had no choice **but** to listen; the voice was **that apparent**. I have this image in mind of Peter rambling on, letting his excitement and emotion in that moment of seeing Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah pour out in a flow of words. God didn't wait for Peter to finish his thought. God didn't wait for a silent moment to appear.

God cut in.

Next, we have the powerful, tender image of the disciples being comforted by Jesus. Just a few moments earlier they had heard the voice of God, speaking to them from the bright cloud that had enveloped the mountaintop. It was an overwhelming experience, one that caused them to fall to the ground in fear. But rather than allowing them to remain in that moment of fear, Jesus walks over to them ... and he kneels down beside them ... and he touches them. With a reassuring tone he says to them, "Get up ... **and do not be afraid.**"

Similarly, Jesus offers that comfort to us in our own moments of fear. Every time we are gripped with uncertainty ... every time we are seized by doubt ... every time we find ourselves enveloped not in a bright cloud but in a dark storm ... **we become the disciples**. Like Peter and James and John before us, we receive the gift of peace and reassurance from Jesus. When we are balled up in our own cocoons of fright, or sorrow, or guilt, or fear, we have a choice. We can cling to all of those feelings to the exclusion of all else ... or we can open ourselves to the realization that Jesus is walking over to us ... and kneeling down beside us ... and touching our ears with those same words.

Do not be afraid.

Receiving this strength ... receiving the help to conquer the fear in our lives ... leads me to my final point, rooted in a statement I read by J. William Harkins, a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. In addressing this passage he wrote, "Perhaps paradoxically, this may mean being mindful of the mystery and awe of the uniqueness of Christ portrayed in this passage, while recognizing that in some way we too are to be bearers of that light."³

We too are to be bearers of that light.

This is a passage of brightness. In this moment, the face of Jesus was as bright as the sun. His clothes were illuminated by a brilliant white light. Even the cloud that moved in to blanket those on the mountaintop was described as bright. Everything is dazzling and radiant. In a

³ J. William Harkins, III. "Matthew 17:1-13 – Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 2*.

world often shrouded in darkness, this was a moment when the light of God and the brilliance of Christ cut through the shadows and gloom.

The light didn't fade out as this scene faded out, however. Jesus embodied the light throughout the rest of his life and ministry, even to the cross and the tomb and certainly in the brightness of the first Easter morning. Peter, James and John certainly carried it as a flame kindled in their hearts and souls. Now, it is our turn ... it is our obligation ... to be those bearing the light into the world. It is our responsibility as children of God and witnesses to the light of Christ to share moments of brightness with those around us, especially those who find themselves in the seemingly never ending darkness of doubt, or fear, or loneliness, or grief, or sorrow. The moments of wonder we experience in our lives ... the moments when we experience the brilliant light of God at work **for** and **in** and **through** us ... are not things to be possessed but gifts to be shared. They are not like treasure to be hoarded in our personal storehouses but rather riches to be shared with others.

So here we are: three things I pray you will carry away today and ponder ... three things for which we can be recipients and conduits. The words we hear from God are the words we can speak to others. The strength and reassurance we receive from Jesus are the gifts we can use to strengthen and reassure others. The light that illuminates our lives is the light we can shine into the darkness felt by others.

Mountaintop experiences are only those things when we have the opportunity to go up the mountain. For those who find it impossible to leave the valley ... for those whose only glimpse of the mountaintop is from a great distance ... it is important that we bring them our experiences in the brightness. Mountaintop experiences don't end when we come off the mountain; the **experience** ... and the **memory** ... and the **gift** ... remains. Whenever we can we should take the words, the love and the light we receive on the mountain to all those in the living in the darkness of the valley.

In that way, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."⁴ In that way, all will know that Jesus **is** the beloved Son of God.

Amen.

⁴ Isaiah 40:4 (NRSV).