



Are You Listening?



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2018-02-11-AWW.mp3>.

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The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
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Mark 9:2-9

Throughout his ministry, Jesus often took time to get away, in order to find some peace and quiet for himself. With all of the activity constantly swirling around him, the people, the attention, these moments of seclusion were an opportunity for Jesus to pause and reconnect with God, through silence and prayer. It's how Jesus handled the demands of his work, how he dealt with his emotions, how he made important decisions. When Jesus was about to begin his ministry, he spent forty days in the Wilderness, preparing for what lied ahead, and when his ministry was coming to an end, he spent his last night in the Garden of Gethsemane, coming to grips with what lied ahead.

Most of the time Jesus would do this by himself. He would go off someplace all alone. But, sometimes he would take a few disciples with him. So, it wasn't unusual when Jesus took Peter, and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. The disciples probably thought they would spend some time in prayer, recharging their batteries before heading back down, but then, suddenly, Jesus was transfigured before them. His clothes became a dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them, and there appeared Moses and Elijah, who were talking with Jesus.

It's hard for us to fully comprehend the spiritual power of that moment. Only a few days earlier, Jesus had asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And now, on that mountaintop, the disciples knew. All of their questions were answered. All of their doubts were put to rest. The transfiguration was the epiphany of epiphanies. The disciples were standing in the presence of the living God, and it was beautiful, and awe-inspiring, and beyond anything they could possibly imagine.

And, right in the middle of it all, in the middle of this heavenly revelation, the disciple Peter pulls out his cellphone: "Hey, Rabbi, it's good for us to be here. Look this way!" *Sel⁹ie!*

I know it sounds silly, but Peter was always like that, jumping in at the most inopportune time, acting so quickly he could never fully appreciate what Jesus was saying or what Jesus was doing. It's why we know more about Peter than any other disciple – he was always front and center, in the middle of the action. It was Peter who continually asked Jesus to explain the parables, and Peter who constantly answered Jesus' questions. It was Peter who stepped out of the boat and tried walking on water, and it was Peter who followed Jesus after Jesus was arrested, until Peter himself was almost caught. But, that's who Peter was. He was always rushing in, and often, getting into trouble. He would leap without looking, and speak without thinking, and no matter what the disciples were doing, he was always right there, like a bad penny, just constantly turning up.

We probably all know someone who's a little like Peter: a family member who insists on coming for the holidays but always comes at the last minute; a friend who always needs to talk and needs to talk right now; a coworker who has to be involved in the latest project. It doesn't matter what the project is. They just need to have their fingers in it, even if their fingers don't belong.

In our family, it's usually our son James who plays the role of Peter. No matter what's going on, James is always in the center of it. If someone is laughing, it's usually because of James. If someone is crying, it's usually because of James. He can just never sit still, never stop talking. He always has an opinion, and he loves to push his brothers' buttons. If one of them says it sunny outside, James will say it's cloudy. If someone says Tom Brady is the best quarterback ever, James will say Nick Foles is better – he just won the Super Bowl. It's just the way James is.

Life is full of people like Peter, and so, not surprisingly, life itself has Peter-like characteristics. Life is hasty and hurried, unexpected and unpredictable. Things are always happening without any warning and on the spur of the moment. Just when we think we have a plan and everything is all set, something comes along to throw the whole plan out of whack. The County cancels school. The government shuts down. We come down with the flu. Things are continually happening at the most inopportune time, and something always needs our attention, every minute of every hour of every day. And, it doesn't help that we live with these cell phones, which are constantly ringing and pinging, often when we don't want them to, letting us know there's another email or text waiting for us. Sometimes, it's so bad we can barely catch our breath, and just making it to church on Sundays feels like a huge victory.

And, that's kind of sad, because when we're harried and hassled like that, when we're always running around, it can be hard to feel God's presence in our lives. It can be hard to see God and hear God.

God is always reaching out to us and revealing God's self. We can hear God speaking to us through Scripture or another person, and not just people we like and respect but also people who annoy us and grate on us. We can see God in music, and art, and creation. We can feel God in that moment of inspiration, when a thought or an idea pops into our head, and in times when we need that inner strength, that strength we never knew we had, we can sense God nearby, lifting us and supporting us.

These days a lot of people are skeptical about all this, the idea that God is nearby and reaching out. Many think God only appears to those people in Bible, long ago and far away, but what those biblical stories tell us is God appears to everyone, not just Abraham and Moses, or Peter, and James, and John, but also to regular, ordinary people, to people like you and to me. God is reaching out because God wants to meet with us. God wants us to know him as well as he knows us. That's why God is talking to us.

The question is: are we listening?

The Catholic priest and theologian Henri Nouwen reminds us that listening to God is hard, because it asks so much of us. Listening takes desire and discipline. It calls us to slow down and organize our time, to find some solitude and silence, which means turning down all of the noise in our lives, putting those cell phones on mute for just a few minutes, so we can catch our breath and notice the beating of our heart.

I know that sounds impossible, and many of you are saying, "No way, I can't do it. I can never find the time. I never get any peace and quiet." And, I understand. I get it. But, I want you to know that God is waiting there for you. God wants to have a conversation, and if you can take the courageous step to make some time, you never know what you might hear. You never know what you might see. It could be... an epiphany.

Back on the mountain of the transfiguration, while Peter, and James, and John were watching Jesus change right before their eyes, a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud came a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

That's all God said throughout the whole event. Just listen.

Amen.

