

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Epiphany Last-B; 11 February 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201802080620)

Listen to Him!

In nomine...

I. On the Mountain

Peter and Jesus had been having some words.

Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples that he would be betrayed, condemned and crucified by the religious leaders of their community. This did not square at all with his disciples' expectations and Peter admonished Jesus not to say such things. Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan!" Peter wasn't quite getting with the program.

James and John had their own issues with Jesus. You may remember these were the brothers who asked Jesus that, in his kingdom, they be seated at his right and his left. They wanted to be second-in-command when Jesus was in charge. As with Peter, Jesus warned them that the thing they thought they were asking for was not the thing they were asking for. Our Lord would reign from a cross: was that the kind of exaltation James and John wanted for themselves?

So Jesus takes Peter and James and John up on the mountain for a mountain-top experience. They must have been proud, having been chosen from among Jesus' inner-circle to accompany him to go pray. They were walking up the mountain with their chests puffed out, hoping the other disciples could see them. They were the ones Jesus picked! But as is frequently the case with a God who is bigger than we can even imagine, the experience they got was not exactly the experience they expected!

When Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest religious leaders ever, appeared, Peter, James, and John said to themselves, "This is more like it!" This was the Messiah they expected. Peter sought to interject himself into the conversation, to build a memorial to hold onto the moment, to exercise some control now that things were going the way he had planned.

Then, God shut him down.

The whole mountain-top party was surrounded by a thick cloud: a traditional sign of God's presence. Out of that thick cloud God spoke. God said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

The disciples and Jesus were alone once more. And there was silence.

II. Voices

For those of us who would follow Jesus, the hard part is listening. There are many other voices competing for our attention.

There are the voices that tell us we need a nicer car, more stylish clothes, or a more prestigious job. There are voices that constantly try to sell us products and services they claim will make us healthier, more admired, less smelly, and less unsure of ourselves. There are inner voices of shame, vulnerability, regret, and fear that urge us to act out of our pain and anxieties rather than out of our hard-won wisdom and intelligence. There are even actual voices of parents, children, significant others, bosses: all the people who care for us and about whose opinion we care.

For James and John, the voices of ambition and power were ringing loudly in their hearts. James and John wanted to be recognized, to be honored, and to have authority. Because of these voices, they had a hard time hearing what Jesus was actually saying when he told them about the authority of one who serves. They heard the words, but they didn't hear the message.

For Peter there was the voice of unmet expectations. When he thought of God's salvation, he thought of a political figure. Peter thought in terms of "us" and "them," and he was just *sure* that "God is for *us*." There was no space in Peter's vision of the Kingdom of God for people who weren't Jewish like him, people who didn't worship God the same way he did, people who didn't belong to the same sect to which he belonged. Peter, too, listened to Jesus' words, and also failed to hear Jesus' message.

Peter, James, and John had their own preconceptions about who God was, who Jesus was, and what the Kingdom of God looked like. These preconceptions were stumbling blocks, preventing them from receiving Jesus as Jesus really was. As long as those preconceptions remained unexamined and rigidly held, they stood in the way of Peter's and James' and John's experience of eternal life, life with God.

Jesus wanted something more for Peter, James, and John. So he took them to the mountain to witness his transfiguration. That powerful manifestation of God's presence was enough to quiet the other voices for a moment: just enough for these disciples to catch a glimpse of who Jesus was and to hear what Jesus had to say.

III. Listening to Jesus

At lunch this week, Deacon John told me about visiting Capernaum while he was in the Holy Land recently. I love Capernaum. It is one of those places that quiets my soul and leaves me awe-struck in the presence of God. It's a little tiny town, even smaller than Glassboro, overlooking the Sea of Galilee. It was Jesus' home. You can walk in the ruins of a synagogue sitting in the same spot as the synagogue in which Jesus taught.

In Capernaum, Jesus had lots of voices crying out to him. There were the sick, his disciples, and his well-intentioned-but clueless family. Jesus was surrounded by voices in Capernaum and they all wanted a piece of him!

In last week's Gospel we read about how early in the morning, before dawn, Jesus liked to get up and go find a deserted place in which to pray. Jesus heard the cries of the people, and Jesus answered with compassion. But in order to answer those cries truly and well, Jesus first had to spend some time alone listening only to his Father in Heaven.

Because Jesus knew that in listening to God he would find life and he would find freedom. In listening to God, Jesus knew freedom from all the other voices, freedom to pursue God's will in his life. In listening to God, Jesus modeled what it means to live, even now, in the Kingdom of Heaven.

As disciples of Jesus, we are invited to follow Jesus' example. We spend time in prayer, not only telling God about our concerns, but also listening to what God might have to say in reply.

As disciples of Jesus, we gather as church to encourage one another, to teach one another, and to listen together for the voice of God. We listen in the Holy Eucharist, in the songs, the prayers, the greetings at the Peace, and in the words we speak to one another at coffee hour or in the parking lot. Jesus is speaking in all these places.

In church we make ourselves available to be knit into the kind of community that is able, listening together, to hear Jesus' voice and to respond faithfully to Jesus' invitation. In church we find that we are lots of very different people, pushed up against one another, working together, learning how to love one another and to cooperate around our common values instead of writing one another off because we differ in the details. In church we learn to break free from the voices that would alienate us from one another, and to listen instead to the voice of the one who demonstrated solidarity with us by putting on flesh and living among us.

In church we learn to listen to Jesus.

IV. Invitation

Today I am excited to be with you at St. Thomas'. I have encountered in St. Thomas' a community where, *unlike* James and John, people think in terms of a community working together to get things done. St. Thomas' is a church that knows how to love in tangible ways!

One of the special gifts of St. Thomas' to me is the diversity we embody as we gather together. Unlike Peter, who was slow to understand the breadth of God's love, St. Thomas' is a place that embraces young and old, ethnic, cultural, political, even sexual and socioeconomic diversity. We would not be St. Thomas' if we all looked alike, acted alike, voted alike, or thought alike. We would not be who God was calling us to be. But for a people to hold onto our common belovedness of God and to recognize that that commonality outweighs innumerable differences: that is a special gift, one that is much needed in our world today. That is what the Gospel looks like when it is lived out in real life. The Gospel shines out through you, becoming visible to the world. That is the Gospel that excites me and makes me want to be a part of this community.

That is the Gospel, the radical alternative, that will naturally and inevitably draw in others to become a part of our community as well.

Listening to Jesus doesn't mean that life is going to be easy and that things are always going to go our way. Tradition suggests that James was the first apostle to be martyred, and that Peter also was crucified.

Likewise, church isn't always about "Alleluias" and feeling good. Sometimes we put the Alleluias away and observe Lenten fasts. Sometimes the process of our own transfiguration will involve getting up while it is still dark and going to some lonely place in order to pray. It is the church that teaches us to engage the process. From week to week it is the church that holds that silence for us.

Because in the end it is the voice of Jesus that will give us freedom. You and Jesus may have to have some words! But as he patiently deals with you in your passions and compulsions, you will gradually learn to hear the voice of Jesus. Jesus is calling to you, trying to help you understand that you are worthy. You are deeply, perfectly loved by God. Listen to him!

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Sermon Questions:

1. What are the voices that fill your ears and threaten to drown out the gentle invitation of Jesus?
2. When does Jesus seem to be something other than what you wish Jesus would be?
3. What is your experience of hearing the voice of God?