



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

## “Experience – Listen – Follow”

*Luke 9:28-36*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“28 Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. 30 And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, 31 who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. 34 As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" 36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen. “*

Transfiguration  
February 10, 2013

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, in the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son You confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of Moses and Elijah. In the voice that came from the bright cloud You wonderfully foreshowed our adoption by grace. Mercifully make us co-heirs with the King in His glory and bring us to the fullness of our inheritance in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Let's take a little poll. If you could live next to the ocean, or in the mountains, which would you choose? Who would choose the ocean? Who would choose the mountains? I'm sure you ocean people are thinking walks along the beach, fresh seafood, basking in the sun. When I think of the ocean I think of sun burn and sand in my teeth and stinging jellyfish, hurricanes. When I think of the mountains, I think of hiking in a changing landscape. I think of majestic views, and fascinating old mining towns and rivers with ice cold, crystal clear water.

Either way, it's a hypothetical question. The only saltwater around here is the kind you boil pasta in, and of course, there are no mountains. In fact, they say in parts of Illinois you can sit on your porch and watch your dog run away for a week!

In the Old Testament, the mountains are places where special things happen. It seems God often chooses to disclose himself in the mountains. There's that familiar story of Moses on the mountain encountering God's presence in the burning bush. And of course, Moses is the one who receives the law from God on the mountain. The prophet Elijah who figures in the account of the Transfiguration this morning, he encounters God on Mount Horeb. It's a beautiful text where God comes not in the earthquake, nor in the wind, or fire, but in the gentle whisper, the "still, small voice". In Matthew, when Jesus gives us the Beatitudes, the promises of blessedness, this takes

place on a mountain, the “Sermon on the Mount” we call it. And today, on this mountain top we encounter as strange a scene as there is in all of Scripture.

Jesus brings Peter, James and John with him up the mountain, where the three disciples are given this incredible and mysterious experience. Jesus is transfigured before them. It’s the same root word in Greek as it is for the word *metamorphosis*. The appearance of his face is altered; his clothing becomes dazzling white. Then the experience expands to include Moses and Elijah, as if those representatives of the Old Testament, the Old Covenant are bringing continuity to the One who embodies the New Covenant, the new relationship with God.

As if that’s not enough, we encounter a cloud. Be careful in scriptures whenever you encounter a cloud on a mountain, because the presence of God is in that cloud. Sure enough, at the Transfiguration, from the cloud, we hear the voice of the Holy One of Israel. It’s a reminder of the words that were said at the baptism of Jesus, “This is my Son. Listen to him!”

Well, what are we to make of all this? What is to be our response to this strange event? I break it down into three words: Experience – Listen – Follow.

Peter, James and John were given this incredible, mysterious experience of God’s transcendence. None of us have experienced anything like that, and yet, there are experiences we have, on a much smaller scale . . . no blinding light or booming voices, but experiences nonetheless that have a way of grabbing our attention and turning it to God. There are life changing experiences that alter the way we see ourselves, our lives, our purpose, our destiny. For one, it might be brushing up against God’s creativity with the birth of your child. And still for another, it might be a near miss on the highway. For another, it might be sitting at the bedside of a parent and holding his hand as life slips away. In other words, these experiences can be the sort of wonderful, mountaintop events, but they can also occur in the darkest valley in the

midst of suffering and despair. The experiences vary greatly, but what they all have in common is that they startle us, they get our attention and turn our attention to God. They are hard to describe, and if you try to communicate what an impact they had on you, people may look at you and say, “That’s nice” as if you’ve lost a few of your marbles.

Similarly, at the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John see Jesus unmasked. They get a glimpse of the divine nature of God’s Son. It defies description, and it’s hardly reasonable. “They kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen” (v.36), and one suspects in part because no one would have believed them anyway.

God gives us the occasional, life altering experience not so much to give us bragging rights, not so much to talk about with others and try to explain and share or interpret. And we cannot count on being given these experiences when we think we need them, nor can we force them. But sometimes God uses what we experience in life to get our attention and turn us toward him.

That brings us to the second point: Listen. The voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, listen to him.” How do we do that 2000 years later? How does God speak to us? He speaks to us through his Word. “Listen to him” the voice says.

To put it another way, do the opposite of what Peter was doing. Peter was often one to blurt out something before he’d really had a chance to think it through. We all do that, especially when we’re excited or afraid or angry. When Peter sees the Transfiguration, he reacts with, “Let’s build! Let’s throw up a few tents, one for each of you. I’m not sure what Peter was thinking. I’m not sure if Peter knew what he was thinking. Luke says he really didn’t know what he was saying, and maybe you too can sense Luke’s annoyance with Peter. (“There he goes again, running at the mouth!”) In any event, while Peter is blurting, another voice, a big one

interrupts, "This is my Son . . . Listen to him!"

In general, we're not very good at listening. You've experienced it. You're involved in a conversation with another person about a serious matter. You're carefully choosing your words, expressing your thoughts, and when you make eye contact, you become very aware he's not listening any more. He's thinking about something else. Maybe he's busy crafting his next retort, or his next story.

You've experienced it. You're a little worried about something, a little upset, maybe a surgery is coming up. You haven't even finished your sentence when your conversation partner does you one better and tells you about a procedure she had that was much, much worse. She wasn't listening at all.

Or you're talking to someone on the phone about something important to you, and you sense you've lost him, and sure enough, you hear the clicking of a keyboard in the background.

If you're married, you've experienced it. There's a disagreement, and argument and one or the other or both stops listening altogether and retreats into the isolation and loneliness and hell of silence.

One of the greatest gifts we can give someone is to really listen to them. That's one reason I'm so glad we have the Stephen Ministry here, people who, in training, spend a lot of time honing their listening skills, because I'm convinced by nature, none of us is a very good listener. And as we neglect to really listen to one another, so also we often neglect to really listen to God. He promises to speak to us through his Word. He promises his Word is a lamp to our feet and light for our path. But the fact is, we'll go just about anywhere for guidance before we go to his Word. We'll trust our own instincts, our own wisdom, or the world wide web, rather than his Word. We'll look to public opinion polls rather than his Word. We'll share our own opinions rather than his Word. We're more ready at the mouth than we are with the ears. We do not, in fact, listen very well.

Sometime when you're in an art museum, take a

close look at the Russian icons. The saints of God are painted in a odd way . . . their faces appear long, narrow, without expression. But if you look closely, you will notice the saints have really big ears, and really small mouths. The idea, of course, is that the saints of God are good listeners, but they measure their words.

“This is my Son. Listen to him.” Listen to him, “because we cannot by our own reason or strength come to him.” Listen to him, for his thoughts are not your thoughts and his ways are not your ways (Is. 55:8ff). Listen to him, because Paul wrote, “faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Listen to him, because Jesus promises, “Whoever hears my words and believes . . . has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (Jn. 5:24). Listen to him, because where else are you going to go? He has the words of eternal life (Jn. 6:68).

I do believe God gives us powerful experiences, experiences we cannot always understand and can rarely explain. I do not believe it is particularly important to talk about them and try to share them with others. I do not believe they happen often. But I do believe he has given us his Word, and in listening to that Word in a sermon, or studying that Word in a Bible study and doing the daily devotions, that’s how we obey this command, “Listen to him.” And that’s how we know with a certainty God’s will for us. We don’t all have the same experiences, but we do all have the same Word.

Experience, listen, follow. Finally, follow him as he walks down the mountain into the valley of human need. After the Transfiguration they go down into the valley, and they are immediately confronted by a great crowd of people with great needs. For instance there’s that desperate father whose son is not well at all. Jesus doesn’t stay on that mountaintop. That’s not why he’s come. He’s come to be Servant of all. So Jesus comes down into the valley where there are a lot of people

with a lot of needs. Follow him then, as did his disciples, as he serves those people. Follow him as he welcomes the little children. Follow him as he loves his enemies. Follow him all the way to the cross where he gives his life for us and all mankind for forgiveness and salvation. And follow him, down from the mountain top into the valley where we serve him through our vocations, as carpenters and cooks, as clerks and nurses, traders and physicians, as husbands and wives, as parents and as children, men and women. Follow him in your vocations and live as his people, to serve and love without reservation and give your life away.

Experience. Listen. Follow. Give thanks to God for those rare experiences that grab your attention and point you to him. Listen to him. And then, follow him, in your vocations where you find meaning and purpose and many opportunities to serve those around you. Amen.

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