

## **Don't Speak, Listen** (Mark 9:2-8)

Have you ever been in a situation where you saw something that you didn't quite understand, and instead of being quiet and carefully listening and observing, you opened your mouth? I have. It happened here at church when I was about six or seven. I was sitting in one of the pews with my dad and my brother, and I noticed the words that were written above the baptistery: "Buried with Christ, Risen with Him." I was curious as to what that meant. I asked my dad about it. He whispered for me to wait until after church, and when we got home he explained it to me. I got my answer that time, but it doesn't always work out that way. Sometimes we have to really, really, really listen and observe in order to arrive at the right answer. Otherwise, we might get it very wrong. Otherwise, we might misunderstand.

Sometimes when we misunderstand, it can be kind of humorous. I am reminded of a story. It seems a man came into the doctor's office and went up to the receptionist and said, "I've got shingles." "Fill out this form, and we'll see you in a few minutes," she said. Twenty minutes later, his name was called, and he was shown into a small room. There a nurse asked him what was wrong. "I've got shingles," he replied. The nurse told him to take off his clothes and put on a gown. "The doctor will be with you in a few minutes." Several minutes later, there was a knock on the door, and the doctor entered. "What brings you here today?" the doctor asked. "I've got shingles," the man replied. "Where are they?" the doctor inquired. "They're in the back of my pickup out in your parking lot."

But sometimes, when we don't understand, it can be very painful. One day a man who was late for work got on a crowded subway. Sitting across from him was a woman with two small children. The children kept crying and crying. Finally the man could not take it any more. He yelled at the woman, "For goodness sake. Can't you keep those spoiled little brats quiet, so the rest of us can travel in peace? They are so annoying." "I'm sorry," she replied. "You see, we are on our way back from the funeral. Their father just died."

Yes, some misunderstandings can be very painful indeed. And most misunderstandings are caused by people who open their mouths without first carefully listening and observing what is going on.

In today's Gospel story, Mark 9:2-8, we see that Peter tried speaking when he didn't understand what was going on. In this passage, most scholars agree that it is hard to understand completely what is taking place here. As Barclay puts it, this story is "an incident in the life of Jesus that is cloaked in mystery" (Barclay, 243).

In Mark's Gospel, this story happens six days after the events in Caesarea Philippi. There, Jesus had asked his disciples who people were saying he was. After Peter answered, Jesus broke the news to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and to die. Peter opened his mouth and rebuked Jesus--in an attempt to get Jesus to turn aside. He tried to persuade him to keep his life rather than face death. Jesus called Peter *Satan* and told Peter to get behind him. Then Jesus taught the disciples and the crowd around them all the things that they had to do in order to be one of his disciples.

About one week after this comes today's Gospel story. In it, we see that "Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves." Once Jesus, Peter, James, and John reach the top, we see that Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses who were talking with Jesus."

Now I told you that this was a Gospel story that would be hard to understand. I mean, Jesus is with Elijah and Moses, and these guys have been gone for hundreds of years! Elijah was considered to be the greatest prophet, and Moses was considered to be the supreme law giver. So, both of them talking to Jesus may be a way of saying that Jesus represents the fulfillment of both the law and the prophets.

Now Peter, again not quite sure about what is taking place, decides to speak up. He says to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." We are told that Peter says this because he doesn't know what else to say and also because he and his two fellow disciples are afraid at all that is taking place before their very eyes. As they're trying to take this all in, we are told that something else happens. "Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus."

One thing needs to be made clear before we go on. In the Old Testament, whenever a cloud was seen, that indicated that God was present. So miracle of miracles, God is up on the mountain too with Jesus and Elijah and Moses and the three disciples!

Now I can kind of see why Peter spoke up. I think that it was his way of trying to make sense of what all was taking place right before his very eyes. Sometimes this is a good idea. In this particular case, speaking up was not good. He should have done what God said and listened.

If Peter would have listened, he might have been able to pick up on what was actually taking place on the mountain. Six days earlier Jesus was telling his disciples that the time would soon come when he, as the Messiah, would have to go to the cross. The time would come when he would have to go to his death.

According to Barclay, when Jesus is talking to Elijah and Moses, he is getting the okay from them. He is making sure that the road that he is going down is the right one. After all, it is a road that will ultimately lead to a cross.

Then when the cloud appears, Jesus is talking to God. Jesus gets the okay from God, and he and the three disciples are assured that the road that he is going down is the correct one. God endorses Jesus fully. "This is my Son the Beloved," God's voice booms for all to hear. "Listen to him."

What is amazing about this story is that Peter and the other disciples still didn't get it. As Jesus proceeded on the way to Jerusalem and the cross, he kept trying to teach them. He kept trying to get them to understand. But again and again, they missed it. Again and again, they did not fully understand. As a result, they missed golden opportunities to really be with Jesus on this world-changing and life-changing journey. They continued to betray and deny and quarrel and avoid and flee right up to the very end of Jesus' earthly journey.

Let's face it. The disciples were not the only ones to misunderstand. Come to think of it, there were many times when the great Moses himself didn't get it either. He became a killer and an outlaw. He ended up looking after sheep in the desert. He again and again misunderstood what God was doing. He doubted himself. He doubted God. He tried to forge his own way without carefully listening to God. But God did not give up on Moses.

Moses, like the disciples in our lesson today, was also given mountain top experiences. He was able to behold God in the burning bush and to learn from God on his journeys to the mountain top. He did not always get it right. There were times he did not listen carefully and understand. But he did not give up on God. And, more importantly, God did not give up on Moses.

And the same was true of this other person seen on the mountain top in today's lesson. There were times when Elijah did not understand. There were times that he did not carefully listen and observe. And it caused him great pain. Yes, there was a time when he misunderstood to the point that he even wished he were dead. There was a time that he felt helpless and that life seemed hopeless to him. There was a time when he felt betrayed and alone. But there were also times when he carefully listened and observed. Then he could hear the very voice of God reminding him that he was not alone and that it was not hopeless. There was even a time when he listened so carefully that he could even hear God in sheer silence. He could hear God in a still, small voice. And as a result, his life was greatly enriched.

You see, neither Moses nor Elijah nor the disciples listened carefully all of the time. Even these giants of the faith did not get it all of the time. Sometimes they did not carefully listen and observe and they misunderstood. Sometimes the results were kind of humorous like the man with shingles. But many times the results caused pain and hardship. But they did not give up on God. And, more importantly, God did not give up on them.

In this world that we live in, we are bombarded by things that we don't understand. When we encounter something that we don't understand, we too often forget to carefully listen and observe. However, careful listening might allow us to pick up precious things that we might just as easily have missed.

Consider this real life example e-mailed to my mother by Mark Holcomb. It fit so perfectly with today's scripture that I decided to use it before she got the chance. Thanks, Mark. A man sat down at a metro station in Washington, D.C. and played six Bach pieces. He played for about 45 minutes. It was rush hour on a cold January morning, and thousands of people passed by while he was playing. After three minutes, a middle-aged man noticed the music, stopped for a few seconds, and then hurried on. A minute later, the violinist received his first tip. A woman threw a dollar in his direction and continued to walk. A few minutes later, someone

briefly paused to listen, but then looked at his watch and continued on. The one who paid the most attention was a three-year-old boy. But the kid had no sooner stopped than his mother tugged him along. This action was repeated by several other children. All the parents, without exception, forced them to move on. While he played, only six people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money but continued to walk at their normal pace. He collected a grand total of \$32. When he finished playing, no one noticed. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition. No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the best musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth 3.5 million dollars. Two days earlier, this very same Joshua Bell had sold out a Boston theater with the seats averaging \$100 each.

This is a real story. Joshua Bell's playing was organized by the *Washington Post* as part of an experiment. This raises a very important question. If we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the entire world playing some of the best music ever written, how many other things are we missing?

Sometimes when we misunderstand, it can be humorous. And sometimes when we do not understand, it can cause pain. But most of the time, when we fail to understand, we have missed out on something. We have missed something that could have enriched our lives.

This Lent, when we encounter something that we don't completely understand, let us not speak but rather listen. Listen for something that we might have missed. Listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit. Listen for God and for Jesus speaking to us and giving us directions.

And what is this we might discover and re-discover if we carefully listen and observe? We might again hear Good News. We might again hear and learn that God is still God. That God is still good. That God is still love. That God still loves us. That God can still heal. That God can still enrich. That God can still enliven. That God can still inspire. That God can still encourage. Yes, God is good. God is love. And amazingly, God still loves us. During this season of Lent, may we be found listening. Thanks be to God. Amen.

-- Zachary Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; March 8, 2009