

Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
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MOUNTAINTOPS

Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

There's a story of the person who climbed to the top of the high mountain and thinks, "I must be pretty close to God up here: I wonder if God really could hear me if I called."

So he yells, "God, what should I do with my life?"

"FEED THE HUNGRY, STRIVE FOR JUSTICE, WORK FOR PEACE!"

"Oh," said the person, "I was just testing."

"SO WAS I!"

Those weren't exactly the words that came out of the heavens in our reading this morning - or were they?

From the hymn we just sang:

*We have come at Christ's own bidding to this high and holy place,
Where we wait with hope and longing for some token of God's grace.
Here we pray for new assurance that our faith is not in vain,
Searching like those first disciples for a sign both clear and plain.*

Before Jesus and his disciples set out from Galilee on that final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus needed to be sure beyond doubt that he was doing what God *really* intended him to do, that it was *God's* purpose for him to go up to Jerusalem and the cross, not some personal temptation to play the martyr. So Jesus went up the mountain to ask God, "Am I doing *your* will in setting my face toward Jerusalem?"

But he didn't go up the mountain alone. He took with him his most trusted followers - Peter, James, and John - to share this time of prayer and seeking. And that evening those disciples had a most amazing experience that we've come to call the *transfiguration*. In the closing darkness of dusk, they saw their Jesus bathed in a shining cloud of divine light. Surely God uniquely surrounded him! And there flanking him, of all people, were Moses and Elijah, the two greatest heroes of their faith! In that awesome moment, those two towering figures out of their history confirmed Jesus' claim to be Messiah!

*Light breaks through our clouds and shadows, splendor bathes the flesh-joined Word.
Moses and Elijah marvel as the heavenly voice is heard.
Eyes and hearts behold with wonder how the Law and Prophets meet:
Christ with garments drenched in brightness, stands transfigured and complete.*

But Peter - blundering, foot-in-the-mouth-Peter, just couldn't keep still and drink in the moment in silent wonder! Considering the setting, his response was incredulous...but so completely human: "O, Lord," he blurted, "isn't it just wonderful that we're up here? Isn't this marvelous! Let's *do* something to celebrate! I know what: I'll build three booths right up here to mark the occasion. I'll build one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for you. Then we can give our offerings and honor to each of you as very special people of God. That's a great idea, isn't it, Master? Just a moment, I'll get...."

*Strengthened by this glimpse of glory, fearful lest our faith decline,
We, like Peter, find it tempting to remain and build a shrine.*

And while Peter kept talking, God perhaps tired of listening, for a divine voice roared out of the shining cloud overhead, "*THIS IS MY OWN SON, MY BELOVED. LISTEN TO HIM.*"

In those few words, God spoke: Slow down, Peter, stop the talking and *listen*. Enough of your own plans: listen to Jesus and follow *him*.

In those same words, those first Jewish Christians heard God's Word to *them*, saying: You may honor Moses and Elijah and the law and prophets of your great heritage that they represent. But above all, remember that Jesus is my unique child. Above all, listen to *him*, and follow *him*, and you will then know me! And you'll discover a new understanding of what your life is meant to be.

The postscript to the story, of course, reminds us that the mountaintop experience ended. The disciples *found* that life, not in an otherworldly experience, but in walking *with* Jesus very much *in* the world on that hard, hard road to Jerusalem and Calvary.

This story tells us something distinctive about God. I believe the biblical stories where God is speaking and people listening are ways of reporting how faithful people received guidance and direction from God whom they believed was very much with them. I believe God spoke in biblical times the same way God speaks today - right in the midst of many kinds of life experiences. I believe we are to "listen" to God in the same ways Moses and Elijah, Peter, James, and John...and, yes, in the same way Jesus listened...with our hearts and minds and spirits...we're to listen with our "ears of faith."

What we need to listen to God is not 20/20 hearing, if there is such a thing. Nor is it being perched on a literal mountaintop. We may discover our mountaintop experience anyplace, anytime, even in the deepest valleys of life! What we need is a readiness that comes with openness and expectancy; with a willingness to search, ponder, wait, wonder - and a trusting faith in God. Not necessarily 20/20 faithfulness, if there is such a thing. Moses, Elijah, and the disciples were all fallible, sometimes doubting, questioning persons, just as we are. But when they *did* trust, they listened to God in ways that nourished them. We can, too.

I think of the wonder of a crisp, clear night with star-filled skies, of the awesome ever-changing moods of the big lake, of the hush of a new-fallen snow, of the handiwork of a desert sunset, and all the other faith-nourishing experiences I've found in God's creation. They don't tell me what to do. But if I stop and look with eyes of faith and listen with ears of faith, the wonder and mystery of God as Creator become real and powerful. *That's* a beginning.

If I take time to listen, I can also hear God speaking in the midst of life - with families, with friends, in the life of the church and other places. It comes in words of love - and even criticism, in conversations about issues of faith and values - and even politics!. It comes in the words of the Scriptures and our hymns, prayers, anthems, maybe occasionally even in a sermon. I believe I've heard something of God's speaking at times in the midst of all these.

The key words of today's text for us? *Listen to him*. As we begin Lent this week, it's a season especially meant to listen for God in the midst of Jesus' words and life. It's a time to measure what we hear in our daily lives by what Jesus' life says to us.

Above all the voices that bombard us from all directions, above all the gods that beckon us to worship and follow, God's voice speaks yet: "*Listen to him!*" Above our preoccupation with our own agendas, our own ideas how we can save the world, how we'll find success and happiness, God's voice speaks yet: "Hush up a moment - *Listen to him.*"

And we *can* hear his words: success doesn't come from frantically building bigger barns. It doesn't come through anxious worry about tomorrow. It doesn't come from "an eye for an eye" or building on the sand. It doesn't come by thinking we're better than others. Listen for a word that speaks a deeper truth, a more enduring wisdom.

If you dream or vision, if you experience awe in God's creation, or a nourishing moment of solitude, or some helpful conversation, or comfort from a friend; if you read an insightful book or article, or get a fresh insight from a sermon, or inspiration from an anthem; if you hear a cry from some hurting person or group...then you can test what you are hearing with what you believe you are hearing from Jesus.

God's word from the mountaintop is clear: *Listen to him!* Listen with hearts, minds, and spirits, with ears of faith...to the Word of God which comes to us in the life and person of Jesus, who speaks to us: *you* are a child of God, a person of deep and precious worth. Accept yourself as such a person. Then you are free to go out and love your neighbor as a beloved child of God even as you love yourself.

Thus Jesus spoke to his disciples...and to us. His words are no common summons. They are strange words measured by what *our* ears are more accustomed to hearing. Yet are we not called to *be* different, to be a unique, peculiar people, *God's* own people?

Here we discover the gift of life. Listen, then, to him. *That's* the mark of the Christian. Listen...and follow. And God will be with us always, to the closing of time, in all we are, in all that we would be in our journey. To this God be all praise and glory! Amen.