

Sermon: "Can't Not Listen" by Rev. Ray Thomas

Preached at The Holy Way Presbyterian Church, Feb. 26, 2017

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

We see things differently when we believe in Jesus. Not that the things have changed, but we have. We do...we change as we believe. Our perception is transformed.

I remember one such person, here in this church, his name was John. He was one of the most strong-minded, most courageous persons you'd ever meet. He had served in the Air Force, as a colonel; he flew fighter jets during the Vietnam War. He loved his wife, Judith and gave her his ultimate respect. She cleared the path for him to find his way into this church, according to his own timing, and begin the life of faith in Jesus. She, and this church, brought him to know and believe the saving love of Jesus Christ. We, who knew him, saw John change. His wife Judith died suddenly and unexpectedly following routine surgery. John was utterly devastated; this strong man was completely shattered. He couldn't stop weeping, when I visited him after her death, in the hospital, where he was undergoing tests about his own condition. Within a few days of her death, he learned that he had inoperable cancer. He would die two months later.

But, we see things differently when we believe in Jesus. We see different things. John made his closing weeks rich with meaning, flush with humble gratitude, tender expressions of love, and a courageous trust in God's promise of eternal life given in Jesus. He was physically stricken and emotionally threadbare, yet spiritually sturdy; broken yet fully intact; grieving and vulnerable, but kind and even cheerful. He only saw the good. He invited friends and family members to this church, to worship the Jesus Christ he fully embraced, and who securely held him. He asked Astrid to record some of his favorite songs and hymns, to listen to as he rested and prayed and went to sleep. His faith in Jesus opened his eyes to things, in those last few weeks, which he'd never recognized before, things which always were, things which were revealed as so much richer and enduring and triumphant than any cancer or pain or death.

We see things differently when we believe in Jesus Christ, our Savior. Peter, James, and John saw new things on top of that mountain. You do see a lot more when you climb to the top of a tall mountain. Moses, we read, saw the Lord God at the top of a high mountain, received the tablets with the commandments, enveloped in the cloud of divine presence which the people down below saw as fire. The sight of Jesus changed in front of them; they saw things differently. His face shone and his clothing turned white as light. Maybe Jesus always radiated such pure white light, but here the three men saw it clearly, high on that mountain. It eclipsed everything else. And maybe Moses and Elijah were always present wherever Jesus went, always a part of him, never far from the Word become flesh. Peter, James, and John saw Moses and Elijah, there on the mountain, with Jesus. With faith, as believers in Jesus, we see different things.

Some things, which have always been present, become visible. Those previously unnoticed signs and unrecognized blessings. This divine landscape of hidden, abundant grace, always sufficient, never demanding our attention, new every day. The strength to get through, the patience to wait it out, here at our beck and call. The comfort to lighten the heavy load and calm the frazzled nerves. The peace that endureth; the hope that will not quit. Faith opens our eyes; we see new things, the expansive layout, from that higher elevation.

Moses, Elijah, and Jesus are there; Jesus radiates pure light. So what do you do, if you're Peter, James, or John, or what do you do, if you're us? Peter says, "This is great; how about we make a shrine for each of you!" If it were us, we might have said: "What can I get for you guys? Have a seat, stay a while." But Peter gets interrupted by the bright cloud, overshadowing them, reminiscent of that cloud that Moses entered on the top of Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights. Divine presence, enveloping and saturating human bodies. We soak it in. "A voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!'" And the disciples fell on their faces, filled with awe.

John Perry, in that last stretch of his life, in his listening to songs and hymns, in his absorbing worship, in his humble prayers, and in our one-on-one conversations, a 180-degree change, showed me a new person. His life switched from an Air Force colonel's "listen to me" to a disciple's "listen to him". I am still filled with awe.

We listen first, and then we begin to see, new things, as believers in the Son: "This is my Son whom I dearly love," the voice in the cloud speaks. The voice of God is drenched with love. God celebrates loving relationship. The words, from the mouth of God, in the voice within the cloud, are exuberant about love. A voice, speaking God's love, opens our eyes to all kinds of new things! What is it that God the Father yearns to talk about, when he's got our attention? Love. Jesus radiates light; the cloud and the voice radiate divine, saving love, embodied in Jesus. "I am very pleased with him." An adoring Father, gushing about the Son he loves. It eclipses everything else. And finally, the last words spoken: "Listen to him!"

Heated, purified like gold. Cut with precision like a priceless diamond. Worth the long haul up that mountain. The timeless treasure is placed again in our ears today: listen to him. The Father interrupted the chatter of Peter, to turn the conversation around, to turn our conversations with God around, like I saw in my friend John. Listen to my beloved Son, Jesus. We can't not listen.

The words which can open our eyes to the real backdrop, our eternal reality, are only known as we listen to him. Our listening reveals things that are new to us, even down at the bottom of the mountain, after we come back down, with Jesus by our side. Nothing is the same.

When death calls.

When test results shock us.

When the bottom drops out.

When fear overwhelms.

When temptation calls out, or guilt won't let go.

We see things differently, when we believe in Jesus. Not that the things have changed, but we've been changed. Jesus takes us to lofty mountain heights. And Jesus walks all the way with back us when we come down to earth. Even at the bottom, things are no longer how they once seemed. We've always got Jesus: strength to get through, peace that endures, hope that won't quit. Those other, lesser, things pale, and shrink, and are eclipsed by the brilliant, beaming light. We know who to listen to. We can't not listen.