

Listening Before Talking

Mark 9:2-10

February 11, 2018

Ted V. Foote, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, TX

Jesus appeared as if illuminated by a heavenly spotlight; and Peter talked before he listened, saying to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three shelters to serve as shade from the sun: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Then the narrator adds what is essentially a parenthetical note: “Peter did not know what to say, because he and James and John were terrified of this light and the vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah.” So Peter talked before he listened, suggesting that staying in the glow of the moment for as long as possible – including permanently, for all we can tell – might be a positive possibility. At that point, however, a cloud appeared, suffusing and reducing the glare from the light, and a voice said to be from God gives instruction: “This is my Son, the Beloved: Listen to him.” Don’t talk quickly, but listen, because this is a multi-layered story. There are very similar versions of Mark’s account both in Matthew (17:1-8) and in Luke (9:28-36). Within the story itself, there’s the climb, the vision, the misperception, the clarification, and the descent-and-resuming of the journey. Preceding the story exist layered traditions of earlier scriptures in which Moses and Elijah appear.

You and I know about “multi-layered” in life, when we are learning both tasks and relationships. For example, (1) when painting a building’s exterior, you scrape and sand (or possibly power wash), then define the edges with tape, paint with primer, then paint with the outer color. (2) When making a lasagna, you butter the dish, lay down slightly boiled pasta, pour in half of a cottage cheese, egg, and Parmesan mixture, add grated mozzarella or Monterrey jack cheese, add the ground meat and tomato mixture, then repeat that same order of ingredients before baking.

We know about multi-layered in tasks. We also know about multi-layered in relationships. Ask any girl or boy in kindergarten or elementary school. There are those students whose name you know, those with whom you’ve sat during story-time, those you’ve visited with during play-time once or twice, and those with whom you spend a majority of time from week to week. Relationships within a given class or school change during a week, and during a semester.

So it can be with Peter, James, and John knowing about Moses and Elijah, who are “old guys” having lived and died centuries before. In their time, Moses and Elijah walked along plains, deserts, valleys, and mountaintops. In their own times, Moses and Elijah also were in relationships both personal and public. They heard calls from God which were clearly personal, yet which included public relationships of wide and deep dimensions – with God, in their individual identities, and with other people – a few national leaders, and many people from their neighborhoods and their small or large traveling groups. Multi-layered in their lives.

Moses and Elijah are the old-guys in this vision talking with the new guy, Jesus, whom Peter, James, and John are in the process of following. He is their rabbi/their religious mentor in the tradition of Moses – who led a protest action-plan of slaves beyond their slavery and into risky, perilous freedom as a journeying community. Jesus is also their rabbi/religious mentor in the tradition of Elijah – who led a protest action-plan against political and religious leaders who presumed what they did in their personal and political lives was above reproach, above correction, and above sacredness in relation to God and every other citizen.

So, to Peter, James, and John – as they perceive this mountaintop vision – Jesus has a meeting with the two most well-known of God’s revered protest leaders, who themselves had been led by God in times when the status quo was blocking a more sacred journey, whether traveling to change place-location on the journey was occurring or not. God communicates that

personal and public relationships are always in some state of change and often –because they are not healthy, they need to change. Moses and Elijah listened, heard, articulated, and modeled with their lives a faithfulness to the sacred journey which God desired from them even amid the severest of challenges. God can and will, then, prompt and guide Jesus with steadfast faithfulness in the severe challenges he meets in his life-journey, as much as God did for and with “the two old guys” centuries earlier. Jesus has to journey in a way not that different from Moses and Elijah: listening, pondering, observing, considering – before resuming the journey with a somewhat different perspective than before. And so do Peter, James, and John! Rather than interjecting words with talking – Peter, James, and John are asked importantly to listen, ponder, observe, and consider, before resuming the journey. And is such a multi-layered approach any different for us?

In addition to Danish painter Carl Bloch’s 1872 representation of The Transfiguration (as it’s called) on the bulletin cover, there are two photos taken of the same field in rural Missouri. While the rainbow in the upper photo certainly draws one’s attention, the clear-day image of the lower photo includes a very prominent tree in the center foreground which is not visible in the rainbow photo. Why do I say it’s the same field? If you look at the rainbow picture, you can see for yourself, in the foreground, the tallest tree in the line of trees, behind which the image of the rainbow seems to rest one end of its arc in the wooded area. If you then look carefully at the clear-day photo, but to the left and in the background, you can see the same tree line and the same tall tree which is taller in the foreground of the rainbow photo. What else is in the clear-day photo, in the same field area where the rainbow appeared? A large tree in the center foreground beside which is seen a county road. The vision of the rainbow in one hour of one day gives way to the realization that there’s a journey to be resumed on the many roads of life, known through the lives of credible protest leaders such as Moses, Elijah, and Jesus – through whom God is prompting and guiding multi-layered changes over time in even our lives, and doing so by way of God’s own steadfast faithfulness all the way to the day any of us dies, and beyond.

Life with personal and public relationships is never easy, whether much seems the same for a number of years, or whether change seems to double-up in its occurrences. Always, though, listening is involved before talking – then pondering, observing, considering – before resuming the journey on the road. On that road, then, whether we identify closely with Peter, James, and John, or hardly at all, we journey following the prompting and guiding of God whom we cannot see, whose love we cannot earn, to share through our lives and convey amid relationships generous faithfulness from God’s love, while expecting nothing in return. That’s because God’s steadfast grace has already reached out to us and will never let us go.

Beyond the vision, there’s the road. Again today we each resume the journey with the likes of Moses and Elijah and surely Jesus, who all protest from God’s faithfulness against any status quo in which we are tempted to settle – and about which we may defend with words or bow to with our silence. At times we may suggest to God or Jesus or ourselves that it might be preferable to remain wherever we’ve experienced spiritual ecstasy; or it might be preferable to hold onto an agenda of self-oriented efforts. As Moses, Elijah, and Jesus indicate with their life witnesses, however, there’s a journey of wide and deep dimensions and of many challenges for which God seeks our resuming – and through which God claims us to listen, ponder, observe, and consider serving. The journeying and serving for which we are claimed, prompted, and guided opens us to convey God’s love which we can realize, but not earn, and from which we can expect nothing in return, because God’s steadfast grace has already reached out to us and will never let us go.

– All honor and praise be to God.