

LISTEN TO JESUS

"I would hate to count how many times I have interrupted people in conversation and how many times I jumped ahead with my thoughts expressing the wrong conclusion to someone else's words. We miss so much in life because we will not listen. Writer Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day," he recalled in his book *Stress Fractures*. "Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style. It was become unbearable. "I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our

younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.'

"Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.'" "I'll never forget her answer: 'Then listen slowly.'"

(Brett Blair, Adapted from: Bits & Pieces, June 24, 1993, Page 13-14)

Today is the end of Epiphany and the beginning of the story of Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem. For eight Sundays, I've been preaching about being open to God and letting Jesus remove all obstacles in your relationship with Him...this was our epiphany season theme. Therefore, it is quite fitting and appropriate that we end the season in our church with the

story of Jesus' transfiguration. In this story, we have Peter, James, and John witnessing with their eyes the glory of Jesus. The veil of creation and this mortal life is lifted and these men see with their eyes of flesh the glorified Jesus, Moses, and Elijah standing in the kingdom of God. Whenever we sing, "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord" this is what we sing about, to see Jesus in all his glory, to truly see the risen Jesus here with us as we travel this mortal road of life. It is a vision that Bob Romero and Huldah Ferdon now see clearly, as have finished their journey and are with Jesus. But we still have a long way to go...and there are many obstacles that distract us and prevent us from seeing and hearing God's word of love in our lives.

One of those obstacles for Peter was tradition, to commemorate the moment on the mountain with some sort of reminder.

Leonard Sweet writes: "Before God's presence and glory overshadowed the mountain and overwhelmed Jesus' disciples, Peter responded to the appearance of Moses and Elijah with what appears to be a quaint suggestion. Since Jesus and Israel's two greatest dead prophets were powwowing on the mountaintop, shouldn't he quickly put together some sort of shelters for them? He offers to build three shelters — one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. But perhaps Peter is more savvy than we give him credit for. This is an event steeped in symbols and studded with the most important people in Israel's past. Keeping memories

alive was one of Israel's strengths. If this was to be a new milestone along the way of faith, it needed to be marked in some way.

When the Ark of the Covenant finally crossed over the Jordan River and into the Promised Land, Joshua commanded the priests carrying the Ark into the Jordan River to pause in the middle of the river. As the waters pulled back on either side of them, the people once again could cross through a waterway on dry land. God also commanded Joshua to have a representative of each of the twelve tribes go out "mid-stream" and collect a plain stone from the miraculously dried up river bed. (See Joshua 4:1-7). The reason for this rock-hounding was "so these stones shall be to Israelites a memorial forever." These stones would remind the people of the miracle that brought them

and the Ark into the Promised Land. Once the people reached the other side of the river, Joshua oversaw the erection of all twelve of these stones at Gilgal, making a permanent marker to commemorate the miracle and to serve as a reminder to the people.

Have you ever walked through a garden that has "cairns" stacked throughout it? "Cairns" are symbolic stacks of rocks, marking a place or a pathway that is significant in its beauty or importance. You can spend a bunch of money to get a "cairn" lamp or fountain feature these days. Or you can just stack a half dozen flat stones by yourself, perch them on your coffee table and call it a day. The "cairn" tradition is Celtic, but such rock-stacking behavior has been with human beings ever since we first began to yearn to remember and

recall the important places and moments in our lives. Gilgal commemorated a pivotal moment in the history of Israel, the moment the people and the Ark of the Covenant finally entered into the land that God had promised to them.

Biblical scholars often associate Peter's offer to build "shelters" or "dwellings" for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, with the Feast of Tabernacles. This was the annual Jewish festival during which small, temporary shelters were built in order to celebrate and remember the years of wilderness wandering. If building "tabernacles" and not Gilgal remembrances were Peter's thoughts, these tabernacles would also be powerful symbols to "remember this place."

But the person of Jesus, the moment of Transfiguration, is too unique, too unprecedented, to be commemorated in

such a way. Both the monuments at Gilgal and the Feast of Tabernacles celebrated the journey and arrival of God's people at a particular "place." But the moment Peter wants to domesticate Jesus' divine presence the glory...the voice of God comes down to reveal a greater revelation. God's presence comes down at precisely the moment Peter suggests tying Jesus to a location. God's command is not to commemorate a place. God's command is to connect to a person — "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." God's command is to respond to that person: "Listen to him." Jesus is the new Ark of the Covenant.

The greatest moment in your life and my life comes when we say from the innermost depths of our being, "Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. I shall listen to

you, in all I do." When you can say that, and mean that, you will have discovered the pearl of great price. You will have found the buried treasure you have been searching for. You will have fulfilled your fondest hopes, and your wildest dreams." (Leonard Sweet, "Hear Him" 2011)

So as we end the season of Epiphany, I will ask for the last time, what obstacle gets in your way that prevents you from listening to Jesus and seeing the love of God poured out in your life?

Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner recalls one low time in his life when God broke through in an unusual way. "I remember sitting parked by the roadside once," Buechner writes, "terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family."

As he was sitting there thinking about his daughter's illness, he noticed a car that seemed to come from nowhere. His message from God, the word he most needed to see at that moment, was found on the license plate. The license plate "bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then," Buechner wrote. "The word was TRUST."

Sitting in his car alongside the highway, God's message was revealed on the license plate of a passing car. It's certainly difficult to describe such an experience. "Was the experience something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while?" Or was it the word of God?

"I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both," Buechner wrote, "but for me it was an epiphany." The

owner of the car turned out to be a trust officer at a local bank. After reading of the incident somewhere, the trust officer paid a personal visit to Buechner one afternoon. He presented Buechner with the license plate, which bore the word that he so desperately needed to see that day...TRUST. Buechner placed that license plate on a bookshelf where it serves to remind him of his trust in God. "It is rusty around the edges and a little battered," he writes, "and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen." (King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com)

Are fear and depression and despair about the future obstacles to God's grace in your life? Perhaps you need a Word from God this morning that says, "Listen to Jesus, trust Him, connect to the One who loves and saves you." How do we listen to Jesus, how do we see the risen Christ here with us in the midst of life that seems so overwhelming

at times? For a couple of years now, these questions have been answered from the pulpit with the Big 5 ways of connecting to God: PRAYER, STUDY of Scripture, WORSHIP and Sacraments, SMALL GROUP ACCOUNTABILITY, and WORKS OF LOVE. I know they seem so simple, so straightforward, and sometimes annoying that these five spiritual disciplines are all I talk about...but they are absolutely essential for Christians. Encased within these disciplines are ways that God connects with us both in our private devotions and as a community of faith. They are the bulldozers that knock over our obstacles to grace and make our paths straight. Both individual and corporate experiences of God's grace give us the moments on the mountain that we need and we receive a different perspective of our life in the valley. Whenever life in the

valley gets difficult, when trust in God becomes laughable, when this mortal journey becomes a burden, you have these five ways to connect to God and listen slowly to Jesus once again.

As we move into Lent, and out of the season of Epiphany, I pray that you will continue to listen to Jesus and let nothing else get in your way. But if obstacles do come your way, and they will for both you and me, we can remember and tell others of these five ways to connect to God and let Jesus remove the scales from our eyes and the plugs from our ears. There is hope that God wants to give you today, there is a way through every valley of life, there is a way back to our Creator, to the One who loves us and has never let us go. Come, let us go up the mountain and pray.