

Title: Are You Listening?
Text: Mark 9: 2 – 9
Date: Feb. 11, 2018

Let me begin this morning by currying favor with those who are into the church calendar. This is Transfiguration Sunday, which is always the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, and always the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, when we begin Lent. The reading for this Sunday is always one of the accounts of the Transfiguration found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

For those of you into symmetry, and those who are members of the Association of Professional English Majors, we should point out that there are two times in Mark when Jesus ascends a mountain. Today, when Jesus is lit up like a Christmas tree; and at the end of the gospel, when Jesus ascends Mount Golgatha, and is crucified. It is well worth considering which Jesus you are drawn to: the dazzling, other-worldly Jesus; or the beaten and bloodied Jesus on the cross. Maybe next year.

For today, however, I was struck by some other symmetry. There are two times in the Gospel of Mark when we are told that the voice of God is heard. The first time is at the baptism of Jesus, which really launches the season of Epiphany. There, when Jesus comes out of the water, we are told that a voice came from heaven saying, **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."** (Mk. 1:11) The only other time in Mark reference is made to the voice of God is today when we read that a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, **"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"** (Mk. 9:7) Symmetry.

Now there are oodles of other details in today's passage that frankly can become a distraction for preachers. Somewhere today, someone is preaching on the significance of Moses and Elijah making an appearance. Somewhere today, someone else is preaching on the significance of the disciples wanting to construct three dwelling places. Somewhere today, someone is making a bad joke about Jesus' robes being **"dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them."** (Mk. 9:3) I think sometimes, in our compulsion to master the details, we miss the punch line.

When the voice of God comes on the scene, I think we are to take note! We are told that from the cloud there came a voice addressing the disciples, **"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"** That seems pretty unambiguous. Now it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see the invitation to look for the connection between the disciples and us. We don't have an earthly Jesus today to listen to in this millennium, so what would it mean to us gathered here to hear The Voice of God saying to you – in no uncertain terms – **"Listen to The Beloved!"**? Our reaction might be to build structures, or impress one another with our knowledge of historical-textual criticism. *Anything* other than hearing head-on the no-nonsense exhortation: **"Listen to The Beloved!"**

While you might not think of it, the preacher does have some decisions to make when reading a text like this to a congregation. What kind of tone, and inflection do you use? Do you read with a deep, booming voice: **"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"** Or do you read with a quiet, reflective voice, **"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"** The preacher has some decisions to make, and they are *not* insignificant.

In doing some recreational reading in the Jewish Encyclopedia I discovered that in Jewish tradition that *bat kol* is the Hebrew that is used when referring to the voice of God. This is a unique Hebrew expression that has no real equivalent in any other language that I know of. *Kol* refers to voice or a sound. *Bat kol* would then literally be translated the "daughter of a voice."

While there might be a couple of meanings here, one sense is that it might be a kind of voice that resembles an echo in its mysteriousness, elusiveness or eeriness. . . but that is *not* an echo at all. The Hebrew lexicographer Eliezer Ben-Yehuda defined it as **“A voice that is heard as though out of nowhere, so that it is impossible to know whence or from whom it comes . . . especially a supernatural voice that may reveal God’s will.”** Isn’t that interesting?

Last week I made a passing reference to I Kings 19 when God spoke to Elijah on the mountain. **“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”** (vv. 11 – 13) It was not a regular voice. It was *bat kol* - the daughter of a voice.

Have we been making it hard for ourselves all these years? Have we been waiting for the booming voice of God, when all this time we should have been discerning and receptive to God’s *bat kol*? Maybe there is something we can learn from our Quaker friends.

In our text today we are exhorted to **“Listen to The Beloved!”** How are we to do that? There are, in fact, many ways.

Anyone skilled as a Spiritual Director will ask you to listen to your life. Frederick Buechner says, **“Listen to your life. Listen to what happens to you, because it is through what happens to you that God speaks. It’s in language that’s not always easy to decipher, but it’s there, powerfully, memorably, unforgettably.”** (excerpt from *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner*)

Have you heard “the daughter of a voice?” I know that many of you have read Cynthia Bourgeault, author of “The Wisdom Jesus.” While it is not in her book, she tells of a time many years ago when she was receiving communion when she had a powerful experience of hearing God’s voice, and being called God’s beloved.

Of course many people claim to have heard God’s voice through scripture. Now please don’t take this in the sense of breaking the code on a particular verse, but more likely hearing a Voice through that meditative, daily devotional practice that many of you are familiar with.

Ruth Haley Barton has written a challenging book for leadership teams on *hearing God’s voice together* - something far different than putting our heads together and coming up with a reasonable solution. Richard Rohr describes this kind of “group-think” as a substitute for “God-think.

While we might think there is an appeal to hearing God’s booming voice, Earnest Larkin assures us that hearing God’s voice **“in its fullness takes a practiced heart, fine-tuned to hear the word of God and the single-mindedness to follow that word in love. It is truly a gift from God, but not one dropped from the skies fully formed. It is a gift cultivated by a prayerful life and the search for self-knowledge.”**

In our text today we are exhorted to **“Listen to The Beloved!”** Once we trust and perceive the *bat kol* as “The Beloved” this becomes easier.

The renowned Quaker teacher Thomas Kelly writes about finding that Voice *within* us. He says **“Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is in our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto itself. Yielding to those persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life.”** (A Testament of Devotion)

In our text today we are exhorted to **“Listen to The Beloved!”** Last week we talked about finding and learning to value solitude. Being still relates to the counsel of Evelyn Underhill who writes, **“Many people feel unaware of any guidance, unable to discern or understand the signals of God; not because the signals are not given, but because the mind is too troubled, clouded, and hurried to receive them.”** Be still. Seek solitude.

Elsewhere today preachers are describing a dazzling, other-worldly Jesus as a foretaste of heaven. I am doing something much more basic. I am simply asking that you might learn to listen to the voice of the Beloved while you are here on earth. Don't insist on the spectacular. Learn the quiet, subtle craft of listening to the Voice of the Beloved in the here and now.

And don't get hung up on nomenclature. While I find something attractive about listening for the voice of the Beloved, you might feel more comfortable listening for the Christ, or the Spirit, or the *Logos*, or the Ground of all Being, or simply the Voice.

To be clear, I am less concerned this day with what you think about an apparition of Elijah. I am less concerned about your ability to use theologically precise language to describe Jesus as the Son of God.

This is what I am most interested in: *Are you listening?*

Amen

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2651-bat-kol>

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²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said 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." ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.