

Last Epiphany, Year A
Matthew 17: 1-9
February 3, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Listen:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

What a great scene this is. Peter and James and John pulled aside by Jesus and invited to accompany him up a high mountain. I bet they swelled with pride at that invitation. Remember, they had watched him withdraw so many times before and likely wondered what went on. Now they could find out what really happened when he went off by himself. I bet they were feeling flush as they followed Jesus up the mountain. Imagine their response when they see Jesus transfigured before their very eyes. I bet it was more than they could take in. They barely have time to nudge one another, to exchange knowing looks, to start to puzzle out what is happening, when suddenly they see Moses and Elijah there talking with Jesus. Can't you picture their minds racing, jumping ahead to what they'll say when they come down the mountain. Peter is already planning his response. He wants to build some dwellings. He wants to freeze the moment. Then they're overshadowed by a cloud. And from that cloud the voice of God breaks in, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him."

"Listen to him." Listen to the Beloved of God. There, on that mountain, the disciples receive a new commandment—a commandment to listen to the Beloved of God. Think of it—at the core of discipleship is God's call to listen—to God and to God's Beloved. That's a commandment to us as well.

God is not calling us to a garden variety of listening—the kind of listening many of us do much of the time. God is not calling us to listening with one ear. We are not being asked to listen as we check our e-mail or do the dishes or listen to the radio. We are not being called to listen while we focus on what we're going to say or how we're going to refute the other person's argument.

I'm not even sure God is commanding us to listen with our ears alone. I think God is asking more of us.

The ancient Chinese character for the word "listen" consists of an ear, a person and a heart. I wonder if God is asking the disciples, is asking us, to listen with our hearts as well as our ears. I wonder if God is calling us to a different kind of listening—a holy listening if you will.

What does listening with our hearts—holy listening—look like? sound like? feel like?

Holy listening takes the Incarnation of God seriously. Holy listening begins with the recognition that the one to whom we are listening is beloved of God. Think of what a difference that makes.

Holy listening calls for what Zen Buddhists call a beginner's mind—a mind that is open, free of assumptions, prejudices and judgment; a mind that is curious, engaged and capable of amazement. Think of how different listening with a beginner's mind is, for we are no longer listening just for that which conforms to our way of thinking.

But there's more to holy listening. It's a listening grounded in the understanding that God speaks to us in a multitude of ways—in the voices of one another, in silence, in the stories of our own lives, and in creation itself.

Henri Nouwen once wrote,

The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends....ⁱ

Such listening is transformative—transfigurative if you will—not only for the one being listened to but for the listener as well. Lutheran Bishop Margaret Payne tells the story of her experience with holy listening. At the beginning of the process, she set her personal opinion aside. Reflecting on her experience she said,

An interesting thing happened when I came toward the end of my work and prepared to take my opinion out again. I found that...my opinion had been transformed. My opinion had been a sharp sword with which I used to cut at people, using words that were sometimes angry and sometimes self-righteous. But when I took my opinion back out after all of these months of holy listening, both to people with whom I agreed and people with whom I disagreed mightily, I discovered that God had transformed the sword of my opinion into a plow.ⁱⁱ

Holy listening has that power—the power to change swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, but it has another power as well—the power to transform strangers into friends. A practice of holy listening both affirms and confirms a fundamental truth about each of us and all of us—that we are beloved of God.

In the weeks and months ahead, we will engage in a practice of holy listening as we do the work of listening for God's call to us as a community of faith—both here at Trinity and in the Diocese of Northern California. Like Peter and James and John, we will take some time out to reflect on where God is calling us. In our Lenten Series we will hear the stories of other congregations and listen to the questions those stories raise for us. On Sunday, March 2, at each service, we will join with other congregations in our diocese in discerning God's call to our diocese through the telling and hearing stories of stories. On Saturday, May 3, our whole congregation will gather to explore together where God is calling Trinity.

Let us in this season of holy listening open ourselves to the transformative power of God who says to us, “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” Amen.

ⁱ Henri Nouwen quoted in “Brushstroke Meditations,” Elyn MacInnes,
www.episcopalchurch.org/79706_22210_ENG_HTM.htm?menupage=73980

ⁱⁱ Margaret Payne, “Holy Listening” in Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Partners in the spirit, July, 2005.