

Epiphany Last, Year B, 021912

*"This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."*

In the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Let me tell you a story about listening.

Over the recent Christmas holidays, as many of you know, Buck St. John was in the hospital for a couple of weeks. Her whole family was worried about her. At the end of her stay there, she was told she would need to go somewhere where she could receive therapy for a few weeks. She went to 'the Allen' - a nursing home - where she received great care and became the 'star' of Physical Therapy although she remained somewhat frail.

She and her daughters, Amy and Frances, decided that she should not return home to continue to live alone, but they all thought she did not need to stay in a nursing home. They hoped that Buck could become a resident of Murray House, the assisted living facility next door to All Saints. However, because of other physical limitations, they all worried that she might not 'pass' the test that Murray House required in order to become a resident.

The day came for the evaluation. Frances was at her job, waiting for the call that would say how her mom had done on the test. When the call finally came, she was thrilled to find out Buck had, indeed, passed the test. She could move to Murray House. Frances immediately called her daughter in Atlanta to tell her the good news, thinking all the while that Mary Hunter had been sitting by the phone, worrying about the results, too.

When Mary Hunter answered the phone, Frances said, "Mary Hunter, Mama passed!" There was dead silence on the other end. Frances said, "Mary Hunter, aren't you excited?!" Still nothing. Finally Mary Hunter said, "What exactly do you mean?"

Sometimes what we hear is not what was intended for us to hear.

In this season of Epiphany we have been listening to stories that reveal the Christ child and his mission to the world. We have found out that Christmas is about much more than a baby; that while Jesus came to be the savior, the Messiah, he defines that term in ways no one ever expected; and that Jesus' healing ministry tells us more about what our part is in God's mission in the world. In today's lesson we have the story of more revelation about Jesus' identity and purpose. This revelation takes place on a mountaintop.

Since mountaintops have long been thought of as places where earth and heaven meet, it has been assumed that going up a mountain gives one closer and better access to the divine. While that is not really the case - you can encounter God anywhere - it's a lot more spectacular to have your meeting on a mountain. You get good views, winding paths that bring surprises around every turn, and clouds that hover over you so people below can't see what is happening to you!

Let's look at the passage for a few minutes. Jesus and the disciples go to a mountaintop to get away. While they are up there they see Moses and Elijah standing with Jesus and talking to him. And they see Jesus "transfigured" -- his appearance changed, his face shining like the sun.

These two figures from Israel's past were significant: Moses represented the law that had held the people together since the Exodus and that had molded their lives as a nation; Elijah, the prophet, was the symbol of all the prophets who called the people back to faithfulness and who reminded them of their call as a "light to the nations". Mark is telling the listener that the law and the prophets were brought together in Jesus; that Jesus was firmly grounded in the history and traditions of his people.

The sight of Jesus and the two heroes of Israel's history together, coupled with the change in Jesus' appearance must have been so awesome that the disciples reacted in the way many of us react in the face of a profound spiritual experience: they wanted to preserve it, to codify it, to make a shrine out of it. It was Peter who said, "Jesus, if you want me to, I'll build three booths right here for you and Moses and Elijah." It is not uncommon during a holy moment to want to keep it, to hold onto it, as if it

could remain with us, the same, unchanged, and forever.

But while he was still speaking, a bright cloud passed over them, and a voice came out of the cloud saying, "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am very pleased."

Our usual presumption is that it can't be anyone else's voice but God's, and maybe we think God sounds like James Earl Jones - a good voice to come out of the sky. But the Voice doesn't stop with "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased," as it did when John baptized Jesus. The Transfiguration story this time seems to suggest that there's been some attention deficit, almost as if that simple original recommendation was not enough. Because the Voice adds a simple command... "Listen to him."

Witnessing takes at least two forms. The obvious one is telling the gospel story, our story, telling it, enacting it, and making it as attractive as we possibly can. But the perhaps less obvious way of witnessing is to listen to the other's story, the neighbor's story, the world's story, listening for God's presence, for Christ in the other. Listening, giving audience, paying attention may be, after all, the most profoundly magnetic and appealing form of witnessing and evidence there is.

"This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Henri Nouwen writes in *Reaching Out* about the Great Commandment to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. He calls our growth in fulfilling this commandment "spiritual maturity" and describes it as offering ourselves as audience, as listeners, to self, to neighbor and to God.

Nouwen says that when we don't listen to ourselves, we find ourselves profoundly lonely. But to give ourselves "unrestricted, unconditional audience" will result in experiences of profound silence instead. For our neighbors, we must offer the gift of audience - really listening without condition, without opinion, without planning what we're going to say next while pretending to listen. True audience is true hospitality. Lastly, Nouwen says we must also offer audience to God, asking God how God understands us and how God has imagined us to be.

In so many ways, we can be deaf. Through arrogance, vanity, compulsive talking, dismissiveness, aloofness, and ... through total self-righteous obsession with always having to be right (and just happening to have the biblical text on hand to prove it).

God imagines us to be a listening community, a community where such deafness can be healed. There is much in our corporate worship to hear: Great stories of our long family history. Thoughtful prayers. Better than average hymns. And, of course, hearing each other in mutual greetings, exchanges, and catching up. But our good liturgy also offers us moments in certain of its parts when we can simply be silent: listening, reflecting on what or who we have just heard or seen, awed by the majesty of the possibilities of access to God. Surely, when James, in his New Testament letter, counseled us to be not only hearers, but doers of the word, he was suggesting that doing is altogether impossible without first hearing, without first listening.

I've had a couple of mountain top experiences in my lifetime, and I tried to stay there. But there is no staying on the mountain top. We have to come down to the ordinary and the ugly of the world. My experiences have faded, they have lost their power. But because I listened to the voice, because I followed it, something else has happened. There is more certainty of God, more changing of my life, greater peace, and a measure of wisdom. And there is strength to do what God wants me to do.

The mountain top is a rare and mighty sign. It is a blessing. But salvation and satisfaction comes from listening to whom the mountain top points—and doing what he says.

May we all become listeners of the one who calls us beloved.