

Sermon for Zion, February 11, 2018 – Transfiguration Sunday
Hymns: 363 – All Hail the Power; 268 - All Hail King Jesus;
445 – Open our eyes, Lord; 370 – Hallelujah, Sing to Jesus
Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17; Matthew 17:1-5
Sermon Title: This is my Son – Listen to Him!

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Matthew 17:1-5

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

Here’s what I don’t know. I don’t know whether Jesus knew – or to what extent he knew – or to what degree he realised – just who he was. I don’t know, when Jesus walked down the reedy bank of the Jordan River, and stood knee-deep before his cousin John, whether Jesus had come to fully understand that he was more than a carpenter’s son, more than his brothers and sisters were, more than Mary could put into words.

We have a couple of clues. Remember, when he’s twelve, and his parents lose track of him in Jerusalem, and they find him in the Temple, and he tells them, “of course they would find him there, in his Father’s house,” you get the idea that he understood at least partly then, even if, as we are told, his parents didn’t (Luke 2:41-50). Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist hints at some degree of knowledge that Jesus is special; when Jesus comes for Baptism, John says, “Shouldn’t you be the one baptizing me?” But again, what does John mean by that? It’s hard to know.

What we do know is that after John baptises him, Jesus stands to his feet, and receives a vision – the heavens open, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and a Voice says, *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* And with those words, the ministry of Jesus begins. The silent years are over; now, the story starts for real. With those words, Jesus is transformed, from rural carpenter to Saviour of the World; from stepson of Joseph to Son of God. In whom God is pleased. “Well pleased.” Immediately, we read, Jesus is tested, tempted by the Devil to deny this revelation; the temptation continues for 40 days. Jesus emerges victorious. He accepts the ministry before him. He begins to call his disciples, and the Gospel is underway.

What I’m trying to say is, I think that voice from heaven is for Jesus. I think Jesus needed to know who he was. I think he needed that confirmation, that vision, that gift of the Spirit, that Voice from above. He needed to know who he was. He needed it for what was to come.

The Voice would come again. It was about three years later, three years of teaching, healing, feeding, preaching. And now it’s all coming to a climax, as Jesus is heading for Jerusalem, and all he would face – the arrest, the trial, the Passion, the cross. When the voice comes again. This time, not in the shallow depths of the Jordan. This time, on a mountain.

Imagine the sight which greeted Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration that day. There stood Jesus, transformed before them, his face shining with the brightness of the sun, his robes gleaming a dazzling white.

As they were still processing this, hands shielding their eyes, mouths agape, who should join this vision but none other than Moses and Elijah, the very embodiment of all that had gone before, the Law and the Prophets made flesh; Moses, whose own face had shone with the reflected Glory of God; Elijah, who had been taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Yet both now stood in the brilliance of the presence of Jesus, revealed as he truly was; Jesus, not reflecting God’s Glory, but Jesus, himself the very Glory of God. “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,” we sing at Christmas, but up on the mountain, the veil came off, and the unfiltered light of the “Immortal Invisible God Only Wise, In Light Inaccessible Hid From Our Eyes,” was hid no more. And Peter, James and John were caught full in the blinding power of it all. It is as though they saw him – as though they saw Jesus – for the very first time.

You’d think the disciples – and particularly Peter, James and John, the special Inner Circle guys – would have had a pretty good idea of who Jesus truly was by now. They had been with him, by this time, for several years. They had travelled, ate, and slept as a more or less inseparable group, day after day, mile after mile; in fact,

Jesus had been living in Peter's home in Capernaum ever since he was made unwelcome in Nazareth. And our story today happens hot on the heels – only six days after – Peter had declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. But even after all of that, had they really realized who it was that walked in their midst? Shared their food? Helped with the fishing? Sat with their families? Healed their sick? Had they really seen Jesus for who he really is?

I don't think so. Up to this point, as the Gospels record the story, people's reaction to Jesus, including the disciples, is most often confusion. People just can't figure him out. "Who is this? Where does he get this power? How can he do these things? How can he say these things? Is he real? Is he out of his mind? Who does he think he is?" To which Jesus says, "Who do you think I am? Do you still not understand?" But now, today, for Peter, James and John – and maybe, even, a little bit for himself; maybe, even, to remind himself of just who he is underneath these itchy clothes, this layer of dust – now, today, on a high mountain by themselves, the veil is coming off, the curtain pulled aside, and we, through the eyes of Peter, James and John, see Jesus as he truly is, for who he truly is.

God isn't finished with his revelation to Peter, James and John that day; nor is he finished with us. Listen: *Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"*

"A cloud appeared and covered them." And not just any cloud – the cloud of the presence of the Glory of God, the cloud which had hovered over the face of the deep at the creation of the world, the cloud that led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, the cloud that descended upon the Holy of Holies, the cloud known as the Shekinah Glory of the Presence of the Lord. And from this cloud, The Voice. The Voice which spoke, and brought light from darkness, life from dust, The Voice who said "I am that I am," The Voice at which the mountains tremble and the thunder quails. And The Voice says: "This is my Son. Whom I love. Listen to him!"

"OK," says The Voice, "now you've seen Jesus for who he really is. He isn't just some backwater carpenter's boy from Bethlehem by way of Galilee. He isn't just some dusty itinerant preacher with big ideas and a knack for making Pharisees mad. He isn't just some magician with a nice sleight of hand, or a faith healer who has a way with lepers. He isn't just a Good Man, or a Zealot, or an Inspired Teacher. No, this is the Real Thing. This is one who stands with Moses and Elijah, this is the one to whom the Law and the Prophets have been pointing all along. This is My Son. Whom I Love. And if you are going to do anything, to be anything; if you are going to respond to the awe-inspiring, jaw-dropping, life-changing reality of just who Jesus is, there is one thing you need to do before you do anything else; one thing you need to

do before you build, or memorialize, or institutionalize, or enshrine him in soaring tabernacles of wood and brick and windows of glorious coloured glass: Listen To Him. You need to Listen To Him. You need to Listen To Jesus.”

I think the Transfiguration was God’s way of finally, really, truly getting the disciples’ attention. I think it was what my father always said I needed as a kid, just to get my attention: a good swift kick in the pants. “Have I got your attention yet?” says God. “Do you finally realise just who Jesus is? Now are you going to listen?”

The first time the Voice came, back at the Baptism, I think it was for Jesus. I think Jesus needed confirmation from heaven of just who he was. The Beloved Son of God. With whom God is well pleased. The second time the Voice comes, it says those very same words. Words I think Jesus needed to hear again, to face what was ahead.

But this time, Peter, James and John hear it too. And God adds words for them: “Listen to him!” And it took a while, but they finally got it, these three. And in getting it, they were forever changed. Transfigured. Transformed. From rural fishermen to world-changing Apostles, ready to preach and teach and heal and serve and travel to the ends of the earth with the Good News of just who Jesus was, just who Jesus is, sharing the words for all to listen, for all to really hear.

And now the words are there for us to listen, for us to really hear. Peter, James and John were with Jesus for three years without really hearing him, without fully realising who he is. In the same way, it seems it is possible to sit in church for thirty years, and, like Peter, James and John, not really hear, not fully understand.

But now is the time for us to finally realise who Jesus is, and not just Jesus of long ago, but Jesus here, now, for us, with us, moving among us, calling our name. Now is the time for us to recognise just who Jesus is, to listen to his words, and by the power of the Holy Spirit to actually hear God speaking through them, and so finally be transfigured, transformed. To be born again into the Family of God; to become citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The words are there for you, carefully recorded, preserved, passed down at risk of life and limb, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Luke and John. The very words of Jesus are there, the words of the Beloved Son of God. The Spirit of God is moving through them. Listen to him! Open yourself to him! Fall before him as Saviour and Lord! Give yourself to the one who gave his all for you! And let your life be transformed. Amen.