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2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

## LOOKING, LISTENING FOR CONFIRMATION

I may be the only one here who has never audibly heard the voice of God from above. If all the rest of you have heard with your own ears that divine voice speaking clearly from a cloud or a burning bush, then I ask for your indulgence while I talk just to myself for a while about how I might try to live as a person of faith without that direct sensory encounter with God. However, I figure I'm not totally alone in my lack of experience in literally hearing God's voice because Jesus had twelve disciples and yet, there were only three of them there with him on the mountain when Jesus became a human glow stick and then a voice from above said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Nine of the disciples, plus all of the other followers of Jesus who weren't considered to be among the twelve, missed out on hearing God's voice that day. According to Matthew, this event was the second time God spoke audibly from above. The earlier time was when Jesus had been baptized. Here's Matthew's account of that: "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" It is pretty close to the same line. From the larger context of that passage, it sounds like only Jesus and John the Baptist got to hear that divine proclamation on that day. So, maybe those of us who have not heard God's voice with our own ears are not the anomaly.

There have been times when I was facing a tough decision or when I needed some real encouragement that I very much would have liked to have heard a voice or to have seen some miraculous sign to bolster me along the way. If your experience, or lack thereof, is similar to mine, we face the question of how to follow Jesus without these particular kinds of mountaintop experiences. In our passage from 2 Peter, after a reference to Peter's experience of the transfiguration where he did hear God's voice, he writes, "so we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed."

I guess I am among that group where that message is less fully confirmed with the lack of direct sensory experience with God.

I would like to have had even more experiences to strengthen my faith in God. But I'm not so sure Peter, James, and John had such an easy time with their more direct experience. It sounds like hearing the voice after seeing Jesus starting to glow and then realizing that the two people who showed up to have conversation with Jesus were Moses and Elijah from centuries before was all a bit overwhelming to them. The disciples, frightened to death, fall down in a heap. What did the heavenly voice say – not “listen to me,” but “listen to him.” Yet, Jesus was not saying anything right then. A little bit earlier he had been talking about his followers taking up their cross in order to follow him. He had been shining, and then he wasn't. What were they to do with all of that? Perhaps the three of them were actually relieved when Jesus told them to keep to themselves what had happened. If they had begun talking about someone who glowed, with a couple of long-deceased people who showed, and a message from God's own mouth that was bestowed, the mental health officials might have had some questions for them.

Instead, the questions that came had to be from within Peter, James, and John's own inner wonderings. They may have thought that after such an other-worldly experience that they should have known who was who, what was what, exactly where they would be going in their lives and why. Shouldn't they have had all the answers to all the esoteric questions as if they had been given a decoder ring for the mysteries of the ages? Yet, as we keep reading, it still doesn't appear that these three have life all figured out after their mountaintop experience.

So, are there any takeaways from this transfiguration account for whatever number of us is without this kind of divine encounter? I guess we could say that even though we didn't get to see Jesus glowing with our own eyes, we do get the sense that he is a wonderful source of God's figurative light, if not literal light. And that figurative light is pretty important when we find ourselves in the figurative dark, when we need guidance or inspiration or hope. Even if the light of Christ doesn't hit all of our eyeballs, it can illumine our spirit and our path, and it does.

And even those of us who haven't gotten to see Moses in person, and haven't heard a voice from a burning bush, we have been shaped by the story that God could use

even a person like Moses who had reservations about God's call, who had certain doubts along the way but was met with divine grace time and again, who wasn't sure which way to go, but was constantly led and experienced divine providence even through long periods of time in a wilderness. No, I haven't had a mountaintop experience like Moses had, but the Hebrew law which he was given helps me know that God cares about what is needed in order to build a human community, offering plenty of guidance if I am willing to accept it. Neither have I gotten to see Elijah in person, but his story of boldness in speaking truth to power mixed with the story of God sticking with him when he struggled through a fearful and tentative time, even a time of depression, offers clear hope that God might use us when we are bold, and wouldn't give up on us when we are not. For us as followers of Jesus, that great lawgiver and that great prophet have back stories that can bolster our stories.

And we noted that the words that came from the heavenly voice were words similar to those that had been spoken when Jesus was baptized. Even if those particular words did not vibrate our eardrums, they do vitalize our spirit because your baptism and mine has given us a similar message. Through those waters God said to each one of us, "You are my beloved child." No, I haven't heard the voice say "beloved" with these ears, but I have experienced a divine love in so many ways whether I was on a mountaintop or down in a valley, whether I was in a cloud or in the bright sunshine. Repeatedly, daily, that message has been delivered and received even when I'm confident that God wasn't nearly as pleased with me as God was with Jesus.

And when you and I don't hear God's voice coming directly from heaven to us, this transfiguration story does tell us what to do. For that voice said about Jesus, "Listen to him." If we want to know what God says, we can listen to Jesus, we can listen to what he says and what he does, how he assures us that love from God flows deep and wide, how he reminds us that love for God can't be so shallow and narrow as to leave out love for certain or uncertain people.

There's one other detail from this transfiguration story that at least helps me. Matthew said that the disciples were so overcome by their experience that they fell to the ground in fear. "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'" No, I haven't yet felt the literal touch of Jesus' hand on my shoulder, but I have clearly gotten the message that when I am overcome by my

experience or lack of experience, that he encourages me to get up and to not be afraid. I have to say, I do wish the literal light of a glowing Jesus had hit my eyeballs and the literal words from the cloud had vibrated my eardrums. I don't know if you are like me in that regard. I don't have all the confirmation I wish for, but I do have the confirmation I need. And for anyone else in the room who hasn't heard the literal voice of God, we at least do have the instruction to listen to Jesus. And perhaps it makes sense to do so, particularly when he tells us as his followers, "Get up and do not be afraid."