

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, February 7, 2016)

Texts:

Luke 9:28-43 (*The Message*)

About eight days after saying this, he climbed the mountain to pray, taking Peter, John, and James along. While he was in prayer, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became blinding white. At once two men were there talking with him. They turned out to be Moses and Elijah—and what a glorious appearance they made! They talked over his exodus, the one Jesus was about to complete in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Peter and those with him were slumped over in sleep. When they came to, rubbing their eyes, they saw Jesus in his glory and the two men standing with him. When Moses and Elijah had left, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He blurted this out without thinking.

While he was babbling on like this, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them. As they found themselves buried in the cloud, they became deeply aware of God. Then there was a voice out of the cloud: “This is my Son, the Chosen! Listen to him.”

When the sound of the voice died away, they saw Jesus there alone. They were speechless. And they continued speechless, said not one thing to anyone during those days of what they had seen.

When they came down off the mountain the next day, a big crowd was there to meet them. A man called from out of the crowd, “Please, please, Teacher, take a look at my son. He’s my only child. Often a spirit seizes him. Suddenly he’s screaming, thrown into convulsions, his mouth foaming. And then it beats him black-and-blue before it leaves. I asked your disciples to deliver him but they couldn’t.”

Jesus said, “What a generation! No sense of God! No focus to your lives! How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this? Bring your son here.”

While he was coming, the demon slammed him to the ground and threw him into convulsions. Jesus stepped in, ordered the vile spirit gone, healed the boy, and handed him back to his father. They all shook their heads in wonder, astonished at God’s greatness, God’s majestic greatness.

While they continued to stand around exclaiming over all the things he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, “Treasure and ponder each of these next words: The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into human hands.”

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Stop, Look, Listen”**

There are certain stories and events depicted in the Bible that simply defy explanation or scientific theory and the story we have today of Jesus’s transfiguration is certainly one of them. As I read commentator after commentator’s ideas on what this story could be about or what meaning it would have for us today, I was intrigued by the way in which our acceptance of mystery and the unknown has to do with how we understand God and the way in which we do or do not profess to have faith.

For what is faith, anyway? St. Paul would say it is, “the substance of things hoped for, [and] the evidence of things not seen;” or, as the modern Message would put it, it’s “the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see.”

Surely Peter, James and John had no idea what to expect as they ascended the mountain with Jesus and, once they had witnessed such an extraordinary sight were most certainly terrified by what they could NOT see as a cloud descended upon them and a voice boomed forth that they should listen to the voice's son.

I have to wonder if they didn't keep silent for many days after not just out of fear but in obeisance to the voice that had issued such a commandment to LISTEN!

I'm sure many of us remember the signs posted at most every railroad crossing, "Stop, Look, Listen" reminding us to be aware of what might be coming down the track before we crossed it. Do they still have those signs? I think I could use one for my office.

As I read and studied this fantastic and mysterious scripture before us today I kept returning to this idea of stopping, as Jesus did upon the mountain that he might commune with God and meet Moses and Elijah, looking, as the disciples did upon this incredible scene, and then listening as they are commanded to do by the voice issuing forth from the cloud.

As humans we haven't changed much since that time. We're still being challenged to stop, look and listen as we go through our lives. Perhaps the phrase has even more meaning to us now as so many distractions and innumerable competing idols overwhelm our senses and, at least in my case, often derail us from that which should have our full attention.

I wonder... when faced with the mysteriousness of the Spirit and the AWESomeness (that's capital A-W-E!) of God, do we tend to plow ahead without thinking, much less looking or listening, too afraid or, as the disciples, too tired to pay attention to what the Spirit and the Christ are trying to tell us? Are there instances where we feel like we just need to keep climbing the mountain to get our answer? Are there times when God is telling us to stop climbing for once and be still that we may see and hear what God has to tell us.

I had one of those weird weeks these last 7 days. I'd been struggling with yet another cold that settled in my nose and chest and just didn't want to let go. I felt tired and crabby and mad that I had to deal with these dang irritations and keep doing all the things I was responsible to do. I could actually feel myself fighting the still small call to stop what I was doing, look at what was going on and listen to what God was saying to me. As happens so often, I was sure I knew far better what was best for me and what I was called to do than God possibly could. Oh boy, there's a good clanging bell to let you know you might want to stop, look and listen - right?

What is that thing that makes us so resistant to God's guidance and the Spirit's call? Are we afraid we're going to be asked to do something we don't want to or don't feel equipped to do – much like our prophet Jeremiah last week? If we are called to life as Rev. Lorraine put it so beautifully last Sunday, are we afraid we'll be confronted with something we can't or don't want to deal with?

And here is the essence of faith as I see it. For if we truly trust that God is leading our lives and believe that the One who loves us for all eternity wants only the very best for us, giving us grace upon grace, why are we plowing ahead under our own steam, avoiding that which will truly help us and give us far more than we can manage for ourselves if we only stop, look and listen and let God lead us into life?

Father Richard Rohr talks about the way in which Jesus exemplifies this way of living for us: "He is able to fully recognize that he is one with God," he writes. "Jesus seems to know that it is the God part of him who does the deep knowing, loving, and serving. He seems able to fully trust his deepest identity and never doubts it, which is probably the unique character of his divine sonship. We doubt, deny, and reject our sonship and daughterhood much of the time. Humans find it hard to believe in things we did not choose or create ourselves. Such unaccountable gratuity is precisely the meaning of grace and also why we are afraid to trust it. "I am not the source," the ego says, "so it cannot be happening."

Learning to daily recognize our source and stop often to look into what's going on in our lives and in God's word and then listening to God's still speaking voice we are able to ascend farther and farther up the mountain and to accept the mystery and grace awaiting us there.

We had an interesting discussion at our LEAP of Faith study on Wednesday night about what faith means to us and how our faith has changed or developed over the years. Some of us talked about the ways in which our faith was based on what our parents told us and, perhaps, an almost blind acceptance or, in some cases, rejection of what we were told. But as we grew, we discovered what faith was for ourselves. And although each person in that group professed a profound faith felt and experienced in a variety of ways, I know of many people, even some of you here today who confess to having no faith and I would love to hear your stories as well.

I remember a dear cousin of mine, my only other "out" gay cousin, in fact, who asked me years ago about my own faith and, upon hearing my answer, looked rather crestfallen saying, "I wish I had that kind of faith, but I just don't and I've promised myself not to try and talk anybody else that does out of it." I thought that was incredibly civil of him, but I could have assured him he wouldn't have been able to talk me out of it no matter how long into the night we conversed. And yet I appreciated tremendously his ability to sit with me and hear my story, knowing that his story differed considerably from mine.

"God does not love you because you are good;" Father Rohr writes, "God loves you because God is good. And then you can be good because you draw upon such an Infinite Source. The older I get," he notes, "the more I am sure that God does all the giving and we do all of the receiving. God is always and forever the initiator in my life, and I am, on occasion, the half-hearted respondent. That's just true! My mustard seed of a response seems to be more than enough for a humble God, even though the mustard seed is "the tiniest of all the seeds... Grace and mercy teach us that we are all much larger than the good or bad stories we tell about ourselves or about one another."

In thinking about our need to stop, look and listen I really love his idea about faith which, as he put it is, "precisely that ability to trust the Big River of God's providential love...[which is] a divine process that we don't have to change, coerce, or improve. We just need to allow it and enjoy it. That takes immense confidence, especially when we're hurting."

"Usually," he writes, "I can feel myself get panicky. Then I want to quickly make things right. I lose my ability to be present and I go up into my head and start obsessing. Soon I tend to be overly focused in my head to such a point that I don't really feel or experience things in my heart and body. I'm oriented toward goals and making things happen, trying to push or even create my own river. Yet the Big River is already flowing through me and I am only one small part of it... Faith does not need to push the river precisely because it is able to trust that there is a river. The river is flowing; we are already in it."

I encourage you as you climb the mountains of your lives each day, to respond to those nudges to stop, look, and listen. You might just hear that Big River flowing freely and steadily beneath you and through you, giving you the assurance you are loved and the courage to go back down the path and do the blessed and healing work you have been called to do.

"Roses" by Mary Oliver

Everyone now and again wonders about those questions that have no ready answers:
first cause, God's existence, what happens when the curtain goes down and nothing stops it,
not kissing, not going to the mall, not the Super Bowl.

“Wild roses,”
I said to them one morning.
“Do you have the answers? And if you do, would you tell me?”

The roses laughed softly.
“Forgive us,” they said.
“But as you can see, we are
just now entirely busy being roses.”

Amen.