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The Congregational Church of Hollis
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A MOUNTAIN APART

Mark 9:2-9

Recently I read an article which complained that a lot of preaching fails to help people with the everyday ethical problems they face. The example used in this article was of a man who got into a management position at work. The company was faced with cutbacks and he had to choose between which of two women he would lay off. One woman was younger and had worked at the company for a briefer time. She was single and without a family to support or be supported by. But she showed a lot of promise and had a lot of energy.

The other woman was older, had worked there longer, and was dependable but not as hard working or ambitious as the younger woman. She was married and had a husband who also worked. Which should he choose? He could only keep one. In time he decided that he would stick with the older woman who had worked there longer and whom he knew to be dependable.

As the story went, he laid off the younger, more creative and energetic woman. She subsequently went to find employment elsewhere. Not long after that the woman he chose to keep announced that she was with child and would be leaving the company to take care of the baby. The complaint was that most preaching does not deal with such ethical issues and we need to preach sermons more relevant to everyday life.

I am of another opinion. I believe that the need is not that the gospel should be made relevant to our lives. It is often our lives that need to be made relevant to the gospel. A lot of the difficult decisions we face really aren't that relevant to the kingdom of God in which we are to preach good news to the poor, release the captives, recover the sight to the blind, free the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Should we expect a guide to business decisions or personal growth in the Gospel? Sometimes we do find these, but primarily we find revealed in Jesus' life a kingdom not of this world.

As we hear the Gospel read it tells of an event for us to know about but it is not meant for us to be part of. There are things of God that are not ours to copy. There are things of God that are for the glory of God, not something

for our benefit, not something for us to understand, not even something for our involvement. Peter was there in the moment of the Transfiguration and thought that somehow he was to be involved in this thing of God, whatever it was that was happening on that mountain. We are not called to climb tall mountains and wear white robes and wait for the cloud to descend and a voice to speak. This is not something we are to try to reduplicate. It was a mountain apart.

There are those times when all we are to do is what the voice on the mountain told Peter to do: Listen to the Son of God. It isn't about us: getting practical advice for parenting or 5 simple steps for a happier life. What happened on the mountain tells of the presence and the activity and the awesomeness of God. It is not something that is to be made relevant to us. We are to form our lives to be relevant to the gospel call.

If I had a dollar for every time someone has come up to me after worship and said, "Pastor, that sermon was just not relevant to me," maybe I'd only have a couple of dollars, but that isn't the point. Worship is not about us. Worship is not intended to please us. Worship is intended to praise and glorify and please God. The hymns and anthems are not intended to please us but to please God, and if we are pleased in the process that is just a benefit.

The event recorded in the Gospel began with ordinary things: Jesus getting together with the inner circle of disciples, climbing up a mountain, going off to be alone to pray. It quickly became extraordinary when Jesus' garments became dazzling white, there appeared Moses who had lived twelve centuries before and Elijah who had lived nine centuries before, and then came the cloud. Elsewhere in scripture a cloud has been symbolic of God's presence, such as the cloud that covered Sinai when Moses received the law.

There is speculation about why these two were there and in what fashion they were present. One view is that they represent the law and the prophets. Another reason may be that Elijah was taken up into heaven without dying, and the burial place of Moses was never recorded. And they both experienced the powerful presence of God on a mountain. It was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the commandments from God. It was on Mount Carmel that Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal.

But all that is just speculation. We don't know how or in what way Moses and Elijah were present, but it was a way real enough that Peter thought they should have a place to stay. It was also an incomprehensive moment of

divine presence and they were only to be there for a time. It was a mountain apart because they were not meant to live there but to there experience God in a way they could not otherwise.

In their presence Peter did not know what to say because he was terrified. If you don't know what to say maybe that is a clue that you shouldn't say anything. I have been part of times in worship when it seems that people were transfixed and caught up in the moment: Christmas Eve in a small village church, the carols sung and the scripture read and each person holding a candle which, all glowing together, illuminated the room.

The benediction had been offered and the postlude quietly played and everyone just stood there captured by the music and word and light and the moment. Peter should have simply been still and worshipful in that holy moment. Don't say anything. Just be still. Be still and know God.

Today we seem to live in a world of talking heads. Flip the TV remote from station to station to station and people are holding forth on their opinions whether informed or not. TV is filled with jabbering because it is a lot cheaper to put someone in a chair and blabber than to put on a well formed comedy or drama.

Radio has its share of gasbags. It is cheaper to let them talk than to pay royalties for playing music. Go online and there are the ubiquitous blogs with people spewing forth opinions on which they claim expert knowledge. It is so much easier and cheaper for someone to express an opinion than it is to seek knowledge.

There is mention of "talking points" but what about listening points? It is like the old saying that God gave us two ears and one mouth so we listen twice as much as we talk. On the mountain, seeing the dazzling garments, in the awesome presence of the spiritual giants of Israel, with the cloud descending over the mountain, hearing the voice speak – be still and be silent and listen.

You have seen the reporters who venture out to the beach to report on a hurricane. They are photographed standing in pouring rain, gale force winds, the surf pounding over the breakwater, there on the edge of danger, then explaining to us that it is pouring raining, gale force winds are blowing, the surf is pounding over the breakwater, and he is on the edge of danger. We are at home in our living rooms watching the rain pouring and gale force winds blowing and surf pounding over the breakwater and a reporter outside

on the edge of danger. Beside the made-for-TV drama of an endanger, wet TV weather reporter who could do the same report from inside where it is safe and dry, the efforts to describe this awesome force of God's world is hardly necessary. Just show us the picture and be silent.

Is there a more difficult commandment than to listen? Just before the transfiguration in the valley below Jesus healed a blind man and just after the Transfiguration Jesus went again to the valley and healed another blind man. The valley of needs waits below. On Mount Sinai Moses was given commandments by God of what we are to do as his followers. On Mount Carmel Elijah engaged in a battle with those who were followers of the fertility god Baal. But on this mountain of Transfiguration there is no battle raging, no commandments given save one – to listen. There is a time to build and battle, a time to talk and heal, but on the mountain apart there was a time be still, to listen to the Son of God.

I cannot explain what happened on the mountain. I cannot explain how Jesus was transformed or how Moses and Elijah got there. We don't know how they knew it was Elijah and Moses – did they have their pictures hanging in the synagogue? I cannot explain the overshadowing cloud. I cannot comprehend what this heavenly voice was like whether loud and thundering or quiet and coaxing, though I think of it more as Elijah heard it on the mountain, as a still, small voice. I do understand this part: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" We do know that when the voice faded away there was only Jesus.

To those who think of Jesus as just a great man or just an insightful moral teacher, think again. I have met great people and I have studied insightful moral teachers. None of them were transfigured, none had their clothes become dazzling white, none had visitations from the great ancient leaders of Israel, none of them had a cloud overshadow them, and none had a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, listen to him." It is a mountain apart. Listen when the voice of God speaks.

When they came down from the mountain, the needs of the world were there to greet them, people coming to Jesus to be healed. They left the mountain to begin the journey to Jerusalem and to the cross and to the empty tomb. It was then time for action. But on that mountain, in the presence of the Holy God it was time to be still and listen.

They were told to do nothing and to say nothing. That runs counter to a culture where we set out to change things and fix things and talk about

things. There are those times when we have the overwhelming experience of the presence of God and all we should do is to be still. Be silent. Listen. Be apart from the world for that moment. The world and all its needs remains waiting in the valley. But on that mountain apart it is time to listen.

In the valley of need we learn to engage with him in preaching good news to the poor, releasing the captives, recovering the sight to the blind, freeing the oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. Transfigured on a mountain apart we learn of the time we are to be silent and to listen to him. God grant grace to us to know what time we are in.