

“Rocky Top”

Matthew 17:1-9

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I could not resist the title for today’s sermon. If you are a Tennessee fan, you are beaming with pride. If you are a Kentucky fan, you are probably surprised and confused.

If football is your favorite sport, you must find your way to Neyland Stadium at the foothills of the Smokies on a beautiful fall day. There you will be surrounded by over 100,000 orange clad fans who will sing *Rocky Top* every time the Volunteers score, intercept a pass or recover a fumble. This means when Kentucky plays in Knoxville, you will hear *Rocky Top* many times!

Today’s text describes an event that occurred on a rocky top. Jesus and three of his disciples did not climb this mountain to watch a sporting event, but to engage in a time of prayer and reflection.

There is some dispute about which mountain Jesus went to for this retreat. In the third century, Origen identified Mount Tabor near Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth as the location. Evidently Origen and other historians made such a compelling case for Mount Tabor that the Church of Transfiguration was built atop this almost two thousand foot mountain.

On the other hand, Mount Hermon, a few miles northeast of Caesarea Philippi, could have been the place where they gathered. This is a logical choice to many since Caesarea Philippi is the place in the previous passage where Peter made that bold confession of faith declaring Jesus to be the Son of God.

If Peter had prevailed in convincing Jesus to let him and the other disciples build shelters so they could stay longer, we might know the precise location. No doubt those tents or booths would have been turned into monuments that would have drawn pilgrims from around the world after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

The location is really not an important part of this story. What occurred there is.

The message this divine encounter conveys and the function of this experience in the unfolding gospel story give us greater insight into Jesus' ministry and mission. So, let's examine what happened that day to see what we can learn about Jesus and what it means to be a disciple.

Jesus took three of his disciples, Peter, John and James, to a mountain to pray. The other nine were left below to listen to people's stories and help them with their struggles.

While Jesus was praying, his appearance dramatically changed. "His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them," Mark wrote in his account. (Mark 9:3) Matthew told his readers that Jesus' face "shone like the sun." (Matthew 17:2)

Suddenly, Jesus was joined by two other men whom the disciples believed to be Moses, the Lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophet. The three of them carried on a conversation, and while we do not know exactly what was said, we know from Luke's version of this event they were discussing Jesus' "departure," a reference to his death on the cross. (Luke 9:31)

It had become apparent to Jesus if he headed to Jerusalem to speak truth to power and to expose the hypocrisy of the religious leaders that he would meet with stiff resistance, be arrested and crucified. In other words, he would be treated no differently than the prophets who preceded him, including John the Baptist.

Apparently, Moses and Elijah confirmed the reception Jesus would receive in Jerusalem, but encouraged him to go anyway. This was no time for Jesus to be timid or to allow fear to hold him hostage.

The people who had no seat at the table in Jerusalem where decisions were made and who were being exploited by corrupt religious leaders needed Jesus to be their advocate. This was not a time for Jesus to be cautious and play it safe. It was a time for bold and decisive leadership.

At some point in the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah, Peter blurted out what he thought was a brilliant idea. He offered to build three tents so these men could stay there indefinitely and continue their discussion.

I almost feel sorry for Peter because of what happened next. A cloud descended upon the mountain and a voice interrupted Peter. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am pleased. **Listen** to him!" (Matthew 17:5b)

Even Peter got that message and quit talking. As a matter of fact, Peter, along with the other two disciples, fell to the ground out of fear and Peter never spoke again.

Knowing the disciples were traumatized, Matthew tells us Jesus went to them, touched them and reassuringly said, "Get up and do not be afraid" (Matthew 17:7). As they departed the mountain Jesus ordered them to tell no one about this event until after the resurrection.

I love this story for a variety of reasons, and evidently the early Christians did, too. It seems to have been a well-established part of the gospel story by the time the gospels were written, some thirty or more years after the death and resurrection of Christ. It is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, with few modifications.

My favorite part of this story revolves around Peter. This impulsive leader of the disciples who rarely had an opinion he kept to himself was silenced rather quickly when he offered to build those three booths or tents. It is not often we see Peter overtaken by fear and unable to speak. I believe this merits our attention and further investigation.

Why do I like this part of the story so much? Maybe I see myself in Peter. How many times have I blurted something out at an inappropriate moment and stuck my foot in my mouth? As my poetic namesake wrote, "Let me count the ways..."

The other reason I am partial to this part of the story is because of what God, who spoke to Peter from that cloud, said to Peter while he was talking. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am pleased. **Listen** to him!"

"Listen to him!" The time for Peter to talk would come, but it was not then. During this season of his life and especially on this retreat, Peter needed to talk less and listen more...a lot more.

Why did God want Peter to listen to Jesus? Jesus knew more than Peter.

While Peter's willingness to build these shelters to give Jesus, Moses and Elijah more time together was nice, it was not best. People at the foot of the mountain were waiting for Jesus to return. They had serious issues with their health, and the remaining disciples who did not go up the mountain were unable to help them.

They needed the Master's touch, and Jesus knew it. Staying on that mountain, as appealing as that sounded, was not what God sent Jesus to do. Listening to people's stories and responding to them with mercy and compassion was Jesus' top priority.

Let's look further down the road, though. Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem to confront the religious leaders meant Jesus' public ministry was going to end. Those leaders would stop at nothing to silence Jesus' voice, and this included crucifying him.

Soon everything was going to change. The work Jesus began would be handed off to the disciples, and Peter would be in charge. His voice would be needed then more than ever, and he needed to be ready to speak.

What did Peter need to do to be prepared? Listen to Jesus.

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am pleased. **Listen** to him!"

In particular, what did Peter need to know? He needed to understand that Jesus had an alternative vision for the world, one based upon God's hopes and dreams, and he needed to be able to articulate and model those hopes and dreams as Jesus did.

Peter needed to be prepared to describe the world of God's dreams, a world where people value love over hate, serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting and peace over violence.

Peter would need to tell the next generation of disciples that they, like Jesus, needed to be passionate about confronting evil, righting wrong, lifting up the lowly, finding the forgotten, liberating the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, loving the unlovely, encouraging people to achieve their potential, forgiving people who made mistakes, giving people a second chance, teaching people how to live peaceably with one another and inspiring people to build bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation instead of walls of suspicion and hate.

These were the things Peter needed to learn and teach after Jesus was gone. The only way he could be prepared to do this was by listening to Jesus while he was still with the disciples and by observing his every move.

The way Peter was going to find his voice was by listening to Jesus. We will find our voice by listening to Jesus, too.

Who are you listening to these days? There is no shortage of voices vying for our attention. It seems everyone who has an opinion about anything feels we need to hear it, and they will do whatever it takes to get us to listen.

Where does Jesus rank on the list of people you listen to everyday? Is he even on the list? Is his voice as important as others you listen to throughout the day?

I wonder why we don't listen to Jesus more. Perhaps it is because we prefer talking to listening, as Peter often did.

Maybe the culture's voices that bombard us all the time drown out his voice. Their microphones are quite large and loud.

It could be we have a problem with some of the things Jesus said. They are, after all, not easy to hear and certainly not easy to do. They don't coincide with the more acceptable values and standards the world promotes and rewards.

As I said last week when I talked about holiness, resisting evil and doing God's will often defy logic, common sense and satisfaction. Ask anyone who turns the other cheek, gives away his coat, walks the extra mile and prays for his enemies as Jesus instructed his disciples to do. Being holy—different and distinct—is tough.

There could be another reason we don't listen to Jesus as much as we should. We don't know how.

Peter, James and John had an advantage we don't have. They literally walked alongside Jesus and listened while he taught them and asked questions when they were confused. Our circumstances are quite different.

How do you listen to Jesus now? Begin by praying. Talk to Jesus like you would anyone you love and trust, a family member or dear friend.

Engage Jesus in conversations as you go about your daily tasks. Ask him to open your eyes, ears, heart and mind so you can be receptive to the lessons that accompany every encounter and experience.

Be sure to spend a significant portion of your time with Jesus listening. Allow the Lord to speak from his heart to yours.

When author, theologian, teacher and preacher Dr. John Killinger was on staff at the Vanderbilt Divinity School, he invited Sister Corita Kent to speak in chapel. This was an invitation few would refuse, but she did and did so in a most unique and unforgettable way. On a postcard she simply wrote, "Dear, I am trying to be quiet."

Is this what you need to do?

How do you listen to Jesus? Meditate upon the scriptures. Read passages from the gospels every day that focus upon the life and words of Jesus. Compare what Jesus said to the other voices you are hearing.

At the same time, listen to the voices of those who love God and care deeply about you. Often we hear the voice of Jesus through other people, especially those who love him and us. They may be saying the very thing Jesus would say if he were looking in your eye and holding your hand.

What do you think would happen if you spent more time listening to Jesus? Give this some thought this week.

Is it possible you would rearrange your values and priorities, make wiser decisions and change your lifestyle?

Would you quit procrastinating and be more responsible?

Would you stop blaming others for your mistakes and get help for an addiction?

Would you spend your money differently and be more generous?

Would you quit speaking ill of others, be a better neighbor and roll up your sleeves to help someone struggling to survive?

Would you be more understanding, less judgmental and more encouraging?

Would you be more patient and learn to control your temper?

Would you be kinder, treat people more fairly and be more cooperative?

Would you be more positive and less critical?

Would you refuse to let fear control you and find the courage to accept new challenges?

Would you be a better mate, parent, child, student, friend, employer or employee?

Would you like yourself better?

Would you find your voice?

Would you be transformed into a person who reflects God's highest hopes and grandest dreams?

Why not give it a try.