

**Listening. . .Again and Again**  
**Mark 8:31 - 9:8**  
**Andrew Connors**  
**February 28, 2021**  
**2nd Sunday in Lent**

It's proving hard for some of us to surrender to the season of Lent this year. "It feels like we've been living in Lent already," one of you said last week to the nods that, even on Zoom, were vigorous and clear. Perhaps that's what I had been telling myself last Monday when I chose to work all day violating the day that I set aside for sabbath. Or maybe it was the way I subconsciously twisted the Lenten theme "again and again" into the idea that, hey, I'm a Lenten veteran; I've done this thing again and again - I don't really need to change anything this year - I'm a religious *professional*. Whatever the reason, on Monday when I reached into the oven, barehanded, distracted by phone calls and emails - grabbing the handle of the skillet that had been cooking there for an hour and a half at 375 degrees, I got my wakeup call. I was suddenly present. Now the crescent moon scar across my hand should last at least as long as Lent to remind me that the entire purpose of the season is, more or less, to listen. That one discipline that, despite our anatomical advantages - two ears / one mouth - is so very difficult for us to do.

We're in good company with all the disciples especially with Peter who gets his own wakeup calls - 3 of them in this section alone. Who do you say that I am, Jesus had asked the disciples and Peter was the first one to thrust his hand in the air - me, me, me. "You are the Messiah!" But Jesus hushed him. Wake up call #1. "I'm the Son of Man" or better translated "the Human One," Jesus tells them, comparing himself to the apocalyptic figure in the book of Daniel - that human being who defeats the beasts that reign in the world with fear and violence. In Daniel's vision, the prophet observed oppressive rulers prevailing in the moment, but looked more deeply to see the Human One establishing justice. In Mark, Jesus takes on both roles - the persecuted and the one who judges the oppressors and establishes justice. Both roles meet in the mystery of the cross, he tries to tell them. The cross - that instrument of death - is the inevitable outcome of powers that rule by fear. It is the political inevitability that all true prophets face in a world opposed to God's way of love. I will die, Jesus tells Peter and the disciples, so that the world can see where all this death dealing leads, freeing us all to embrace a different ethic, a different way in the world, a way that leads to life.

But Peter can't listen. This is not the way of the Messiah that he expects and desires. He rebukes Jesus instead. Jesus responds by calling him Satan, the symbolic adversary to God's purposes. Wake up call #2.

And now on a mountain, a defining place for both Moses and Elijah - where God showed up for each of them, in those times in their lives when they were at their lowest, most discouraging place-- On that mountain, Jesus reveals the mystery of his own identity to disciples discouraged that the Messiah that they hoped for - the one who would crush Rome with their vision of holy power - was not the Messiah they had been given. Don't fear the inevitable outcome, Jesus reassures them. "All true prophets face the same political destiny," in the words of scholar Ched Myers. "And it is this destiny to which the heavenly voice summons the disciples/reader to 'listen.'"<sup>1</sup>

But again, what does Peter want to do? Peter wants to speak. Even the heavens cry out to hush Peter - listen to Jesus. Listen to him. Wake up call #3. Again and again, Peter speaks when he should listen. Again and again, God corrects him and loves him and gives him a chance to grow.

I've been thinking about God's call to listen and our desires to keep speaking. There are some really good reasons to listen. In the course of writing this sermon I stockpiled an arsenal of examples to defend that point. The Army, for example, finally listened to female soldiers who had been telling them that there's more than one way for them to wear their hair. In fact, the single, mandated way of a tight bun on the back of the head had actually had the result of pushing the helmet down on some women's heads, making them more vulnerable.<sup>2</sup> The Army listened and it's good for everybody. Medical schools are another place where the benefits of listening have taken hold. Over 80% of them now have a curriculum in "narrative medicine," summoning frontline doctors back to their roots of treating patients as people instead of collections of symptoms, returning patients to their best role as active participants in their own healing. Medicine is listening and it's good for everybody.<sup>3</sup> Then there was the study that just came out about what happens when people who walk learn to pay attention to the awe of their everyday surroundings instead of just pushing through it like a chore on their to do list.<sup>4</sup> Turns out they have better health outcomes, too.

It's true that listening can make you healthier, improve important outcomes, maybe even save your life. This is the way we often teach spiritual disciplines. Point out that people who pray each day have better health outcomes. Point out that rituals in

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<sup>1</sup> Ched Myers' political reading of Mark expressly opposes reading Mark's transfiguration story as "a kind of 'preview' of the risen Christ, who otherwise never actually appears in Mark's story." To Myers this is "imperial exegesis search[ing] for a narrative of triumph." The transfiguration vision does not "rescue" the narrative of the cross. Rather, it identifies the Human One with the crucifixion. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, (New York: Orbis Books), 2002, 245-253.

<sup>2</sup> Dave Philipps, "In a Changing Military, the Army Eases Its Rules for Women's Hair," *The New York Times*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/us/army-haircut-women-grooming-standard.html>

<sup>3</sup> Richard Schiffman, "Learning to Listen Patients' Stories," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/25/well/live/narrative-medicine.html>

<sup>4</sup> Gretchen Reynolds, "An 'Awe Walk' Might Do Wonders for Your Well-Being," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/well/move/an-awe-walk-might-do-wonders-for-your-well-being.html>

life help keep you better adjusted, maybe increase your test scores, make you more attractive to college admissions people - don't quote me on that I made up that last one. But this is the way we often talk about listening - what it does for us, how it's good for our development, our relationships, our faith.

But the truth of this story is that Peter doesn't like what he hears. What he hears from Jesus is not going to lengthen his life. It's not going to make him more well adjusted, not in the cost benefit calculations that we've all come to accept. God wants Peter to hear a difficult truth.

We're not good at hearing those kinds of truth. Contemporary research suggests that even when we think we are listening, most of us are just listening for ideas that we can cherry pick to back up what we already believe to be true. Our complex thinking skills that enable us to process information are often hijacked by the more primitive parts of our brains, enlisted to validate gut level decisions that we've already made.

The witness of scripture knows this. The church confesses it on Ash Wednesday with the story that we often hear of the Pharisee who sees all the sinners and thanks God that he is not one of them. If a credentialed religious leader can take God's mercy and twist it into a tool that he uses to prove to himself how much better he is than the tax collector down the street, then you know that listening *for God*, listening *to God* is a very difficult thing for us to do. We can hear a sermon on listening and think to ourselves, I want to get a copy of that manuscript so I can send it to Uncle Bob who is a terrible listener. Yet all along Jesus is confronting me, confronting you - each of us - with the invitation to a way of life that leaves us less adjusted to the status quo, that leads to inevitable conflicts with the catechisms of our capitalistic world that teach the sovereignty of the invisible hands of the market over the hands of God, might over right, fear over love and mercy and kindness.

I think that's why people like Peter, and people like me have such a hard time really stopping to listen. We're afraid of what God might say to us. We're afraid of what we may notice about our own lives - the inevitable conflict between Jesus' call to us to live a way of love in a world where the hard realities of power over people are always shaping us, tempting us, hardening us to the better way that Jesus teaches.

We're afraid to hear Jesus talking about his own death, inviting us to take more risks with the lives that we've been given, in a world that seems to have increased its crucifixion rate recently. The crucifixions that we see all around us - deaths of people and neighborhoods and hope and safety because the powers of this world are organized to produce those results.

We're afraid to see Jesus locate himself in those places of death in solidarity with those who are suffering, while our own instincts are to protect ourselves, hoping that someone like Jesus is going to intervene to make it all better. We're afraid of what might happen when we quiet our minds racing with what's next on our to do list, quiet our hearts holding on to so much loss, quiet our breath speeding up to mask the anxiety

running through our veins. Because when we quiet ourselves to listen, we know there might be a reckoning. A reckoning with the way of the cross.

That way, I've come to believe is not God dying for our sins, not the way it was taught to many of us. That old theology where an abusive father of a God requires the death of his innocent child to satisfy some sadistic penal system that God seemingly setup in the first place. What kind of a father is that? No, I've become convinced that the cross reveals the death dealing ways of the world - the way we crucify love in the name of other forms of power. And at the same time, the cross reveals the depth of God's love for us - God's willingness to suffer alongside others who suffer unjustly exposing it so we all have to face it, the truest kind of love there is. Lent, then, is not a time for us to deprive ourselves of what tastes good, or feels good, or what brings enjoyment. It is a time to deepen our commitment to God's way of love and justice and community, knowing that this way necessarily leads people into conflict, provoking reactions - sometimes violent ones - from powers that depend on division, fear, scarcity, hate. It is a time to prepare ourselves for that conflict trusting that Jesus' way and truth leads to life.

It might be unfair of anyone to expect that kind of a re-commitment in the middle of a pandemic. We are all too overwhelmed, the thinking goes, to take on anything else. But I also am hearing about the reappraisals that so many are making in the workplace about their jobs - is this work really the place where my heart's deep desire meets the world's great hunger; the reappraisal of family choices - do we really want to return to the pace of activities we had before? ; the reappraisal of your life.

Sometimes, when making that kind of reappraisal, it's helpful to observe others' choices.

As a part of Black History month, I've been re-reading Catherine Meeks' and Nibs Stroupe book on Ida B. Wells. Born into slavery, she lived through her own kind of health scare and the loss that it brought into her life - the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878. It left both of her parents and a brother, dead. At the age of 16 she lied about her age to get a teaching job so she could keep her siblings together. Later she lived through the death of her dear friend who was lynched by a white mob that had assembled in a black neighborhood to attack a black owned grocery store that was providing competition to the white owned store across the street. Using the power of the pen Ida Wells wrote powerful editorials naming the truth of racism, fear, and intimidation, behind lynchings in America. Her newspaper in Memphis was burned to the ground and a price was put on her head. That was just the beginning. Again and again, Ida Wells faced the possibility of her own death, and again and again she spoke the truth. Again and again she gave wake up calls to the nation, held some of our greatest heroes to a greater accountability than they could have achieved on their own,

and exposed both the contradictions in American claims to freedom and the expectation that those claims to freedom are worth our struggle.<sup>5</sup>

Listening again to the life of Ida Wells in this season of Lent, has me thinking that our more updated notion of “taking on things” in Lent instead of giving things up might fail us, if by taking things on we mean tacking on a spiritual practice here, a devotional reading there.

Maybe instead, Lent is a time to quiet everything - quiet our busybody natures, quiet those voices in our head, quiet our rational brains sometimes working overtime to protect us from grief or fear that lies beneath. Maybe Lent is the gift not simply to reduce our to do lists, but to reappraise them altogether, asking that one question put so succinctly by the poet Mary Oliver, “Tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

It takes Peter a lot of misses to finally get to that place. A lot of misses, a lot of failures, a lot of heartache. The good news for us is that Jesus meets him with love and truth - again and again. Love and truth that God speaks again and again to disciples who, like us, need wake up calls to listen.

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<sup>5</sup> Caroline Meeks & Nibs Stroupe, *Passionate for Justice: Ida B. Wells, A Prophet for Our Times*, (New York: Church Publishing), 2019. For a theological undertaking of the links between the cross and lynching in America, see James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (New York: Orbis Books), 2011.