

Listening and Letting Go
2 Kings 2:1-15a; Mark 9:1-13

Letting go. It's never easy. As babies we want to cling to our mother. Once we begin walking, we cling to the safe leg of one of our parents when we're in a crowd of strangers. As toddlers we want to hold on to the toys - especially when another child takes notice and wishes to have them. As we move through childhood and into adolescence and then leave home, we want to hold on to holiday traditions, our room, things that have given us comfort. As adults we hold on to all kinds of things – dreams of the perfect career, dreams of the perfect house, the desire for financial security, the desire to keep our children safe, and later dreams of what they will do with their lives.

We also hold on to prejudices and judgment, to pain, to momentary comforts that actually hurt us. Sometimes we try to hold on to the past, even though it is just that – the past. Sometimes we cling to what seems certain at the moment because the future seems too daunting. And as those who brought us into the world and nurtured us approach their own end, we often find it hard to let them go, wanting to hold them close as long as possible.

We are approaching the season of Lent, the liturgical season of letting go. This Wednesday begins the six weeks prior to Holy Week and Easter when we follow Jesus as he lets go of his very life while facing opposition and suffering - teaching his disciples the paradoxical truths that we find in life when we let it go: that death leads to life, that our deepest joy often follows times of greatest suffering.

In Marks' Gospel, the glorious and yet mysterious story of the transfiguration occurs right after Jesus has begun to talk about his impending suffering. The impulsive Peter won't have anything to do with such nonsense talk as he and Jesus got into a bit of verbal sparring. Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that he must suffer. Jesus rebuked Peter for not understanding that suffering was essential to his eventual glory. Peter was not ready to let go of his messianic understanding and hope for Jesus and the dominant hope of the

disciples that Jesus would be a King like David - throw out the occupying Romans, and restore Israel to its former glory.

There was one rather major problem with that dream: it was false. Although many of the Psalms praise the greatness of David, in the books of Samuel and Kings we find that Israel's experience with a monarchy was anything but a golden age. As God predicted, Israel's kings, aside from a few notable exceptions, weren't much different from the kings of surrounding nations. They became intoxicated with power and led Israel away from God. David had his lead general killed to cover his own personal indiscretion. His son Solomon, who prayed eloquently for wisdom, tossed out the wisdom and turned, instead to wealth gained through numerous international alliances and wives.

How was Jesus to drive his point home?...He took Peter, James and John up a mountain for the "time-out" of their lives. They should have known immediately that Jesus meant business when they started their climb - because the mountain was understood as a place of encounter with God. The disciples knew that God had called Moses up to Mount Sinai when he wanted to give the Law. They knew that Elijah, the greatest prophet of old, had a profound experience with God on a mountainside. But knowing their history didn't exactly prepare them for the real time vision of these great men of old standing side by side with Jesus. What was more, Jesus became immersed in light, brighter than anything they had ever seen or imagined. Mark describes the scene as being drenched in bleach. Today we might talk about high-intensity laser light.

There in the presence of the trusted elders Moses and Elijah, in the presence of the tradition of the Law and the Prophets, they heard God's voice speaking words commending Jesus as God's beloved son. And the voice said: "Listen to him!" He gets the last word. Listen to him when he says he must suffer! Listen to him when he says that you'll save your life by losing it!

Listen to him when he says: “Let go!” Listen. Let go. Listen. Let go.

These are the two most difficult tasks of life. And each depends on the other. To listen we have to let go of all that distracts us: the constant buzz in the atmosphere around us and the constant buzz within our heads that are so full of details that our brain resists taking in new data. Every parent knows the transfiguring moment when a small hand grabs our chin and pulls us in the direction of the small face and voice that are trying to get our attention. We may have been hearing the voice but not really listening. And children know well when that is happening! Listening to God may mean that we will let God hold our chin, that we will pause with God at the beginning, or the middle, or the end of our day, to evaluate our work and interactions in light of our commitment to follow Jesus.

Our ability to listen requires that we let go of our strong cultural inclination to make decisions and act alone. Jesus didn't just take Peter up the mountain, but he took other members of the community, James and John. Whenever Peter would speak of what happened on the mountain, James and John could hold him in check and vice versa. We need to listen in community to make sure we're hearing what others are hearing, and so that others can confirm what we think we're hearing. Our ability to listen and discern means we must let go of the post-modern tendency to shake off and disregard the past, thinking we can confidently create as we go, that we are far more enlightened than anything that preceded us. The transfiguration story reminds us that our present is interwoven with the past. Jesus wasn't something entirely new; he stood in the tradition of Moses and Elijah. We must know our history, our personal history, our cultural history, biblical history, and our theological and religious history.

How does God work in the world? Is what we're hearing and deciding in alignment with God's purposes? The Jewish people of Jesus' day were tempted by the elusive dream that a powerful Messiah who could throw off their political occupiers and would automatically

bring a reign of peace. However, they had the experience of Moses to remind them that liberation, that freedom was followed by an arduous path through the wilderness of learning what it means to be free; of learning how to build a commonwealth of justice; of learning to trust in God.

Our ability to listen and to let go requires commitment. In our Old Testament story we see Elisha's commitment to follow steadfastly to Elijah as he was nearing his end, entering his own transfiguration, his mysterious transport into God's presence. Elisha knew well the ups and downs of Elijah's ministry, yet he asked for Elijah's cloak or mantel, the symbol of his leadership and his call (vs 13), and more importantly Elisha asked to be filled with the Spirit that had directed Elijah's life (vs 9). Elijah told him that he would receive these only if he watched to the very end, only if he stared Elijah's departure squarely in the eye. And then he could turn around, pick up the mantel and begin walking.

Our reading this morning made it sound easy. Elisha parted the water and received the confirmation of the other prophets. But if we keep reading, we quickly find that Elisha, no doubt grief-stricken, responded in anger to a minor provocation of some young, disrespectful kids. Letting go is a process. It involves grief. Few of us do so gracefully.

That is why we have this season of Lent. It gives us time to grieve. And it gives us time to be reminded of God's faithfulness. Time to be reminded, in the eloquent words of the writer of Hebrews, that it was for "the joy that was set before him" that Jesus "endured the cross, scorning / disregarding its shame" (12:2). It gives us time to listen and to ask God what we need to let go of in order to live more fully into this joy.

The Ash Wednesday tradition for many is to receive the mark of ashes on their forehead, the symbol that we are made of dust and return to dust, the symbol that letting go mysteriously leads to life. What is Jesus calling us to let go of? Amen.

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