

Luke 9:28-37

9:28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.

9:29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.

9:30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.

9:31 They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.

9:32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

9:33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," not realizing what he was saying.

9:34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

9:35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

9:36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Sermon: Don't Keep Silent

"And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."

The last verse of today's pericope haunts me.

Think about it. Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up a mountain. And at its peak, they witness a miraculous event: Jesus turns a glowing, whiter-than-Tide white, and Elijah and Moses appear, and a cloud envelops them. And inside of this terrifying cloud – terrifying in every sense of the word; for they are awestruck with wonder and frightened breathless at the same time – inside of this terrifying cloud, they hear God's voice, and God says, "Jesus is my child, my chosen, and you need to listen to him."

How often do we get to see and hear and witness the presence of God in such a direct manner?!? Not very. That's not to say that God's presence isn't often revealed, it's just that most of the time, God's revelation is veiled. But not here. Not In this place.

And what do these three men do? They act like a bunch of men. They bottle it up, and they shove it deep, deep down inside their souls, and they swallow it. And they don't say a word. Not one. First rule of Transfiguration Club. You do NOT talk about Transfiguration Club.

Now I know some of you in the congregation have read this text, and the versions from its sister gospels many times. And you may quickly point out to me the wonderful movement from *speaking* to *hearing* to *silence* in this passage. Peter, amid all this goodness, can't just be quiet and enjoy it – he suggests the construction of a residential development to mark the significance of the event. God's thundering voice ends that suggestion, and the men are instructed to *listen*, which they do! And then they leave that place in *silence*. And of course, Jesus is silent throughout this scene too – he lets his newfound transcendence speak for itself.

And maybe Luke wants us to believe that the disciples' silence is a way to echo the example of Jesus. They don't laud their inclusion in this experience, nor do they use it to promote their own welfare. And of course, in Mark's gospel, Jesus often encourages his followers to tell no one, because "it's a secret."

The problem though, is that these three *do keep silent* – there's no evidence to show the mountaintop occurrence impacts their immediate and medium-term future; the event does not appear to inform their voice, and most certainly not their faiths, as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem for one last week of ministry. Their silence is palpable on a dark Friday and even on a bright Sunday.

It will be the voices of women at an empty tomb that defy such silence, and thank goodness for women with strong voices!!! The transfiguration becomes reflective – It's only after the resurrection events that Peter and James and John decide to break their silence. It's only in the light of resurrection that the three men consider transfiguration.

My objective today is not to discredit Peter and James and John – they more than atone for their silence in their work to develop the early church. And it's because they eventually find their voices that we know the story of the Christ.

And my objective today is not to get bogged down by the details of transfiguration – it's a bizarre event – one that's hard to make much sense of. And quite frankly, I think we can find a better use of our time. And honestly, I'm sure one of the ten other sermons I've prepared on this topic can do a better job of discerning details.

My objective today is to think about when we've been in God's presence and have chosen to keep silent in both word and deed. What are the ramifications of our silence for the world?

In my role as pastor, but also as parent, husband, brother, son, co-worker, friend, church-member, deacon, neighbor, human being – I'm often asked to hold information in confidence. Sometimes, silence is necessary for building trust. But it is a difficult silence.

When one has advanced knowledge of a birth, or a wedding, or a new calling, or a healing, or good news, God is present, and the world, indeed everything around us, dazzles in white. And there is a temptation to share all that is good, and especially the kind of good that's too good to be true.

So also, when one has a connection with neighbor, strong enough to be trusted with vulnerable information – grief, pain, heart ache, struggle, illness – information they must share with you for support, God is also present, and we are enveloped in a cloud, terrifying in every sense of the word, calling us to listen to and for the One who offers peace. And such a silence is hard.

I believe these are two appropriate examples of silence. They are necessary to develop trusting, transformative, Christ-centered relationships.

But our duty to keep personal silence cannot and should not be used as an excuse for public silence.

What do I mean by this?

I mean we mustn't ever silence our sense of calling.

Peter and James and John are not obligated to broadcast every sensitive detail of the events of their mountaintop experience. But I do think they are obligated to make known the transformative spirit they experience as followers of Jesus. In his life, in his sharing of all that he has, Jesus profoundly shapes these men. And the voices that they can offer to such an experience, are voices equipped to bring forth God's in-breaking realm.

When love is in bloom, its partners are not quite ready to formalize their connection in public ways. That's understandable. We all process new experiences at our own speed. But show me someone, anyone, who is able to be wholly silent about new love? They may not speak words, but their demeanor, their tone, their glow, their presence is transformed. They cannot hide it. And change is outwardly expressed.

The same is true for our sense of calling. When we do what we are meant to do; when the expression of our gifts reveals the divine spark within us; we are never silenced. Our listening ears, our presence, our hands, our lives speak and act for us.

I do not have an obligation to broadcast the confidences of those whom I love and have been loved by. But the intimacy, trust, and friendship that have been developed by such transfiguration moments has profoundly shaped me. I am the person I am because of the God I have seen and known and heard in the lives of my neighbors. The people of this congregation, along with many other saints, have led me to many a mountaintop, and revealed God's presence in ways just as miraculous, maybe even more miraculous, than transfiguration. And if I am to be true to myself, I cannot EVER keep silent about such things.

Peter and James and John are silent. And it haunts me.

Each Sunday morning, and other days, too, I visit little mountaintops – the world is bright, Tide-bright, at communion tables, and daycare drop-off, and in texts to my wife, and in needed phone calls or visits with friends, and in prayers at the hospital or before a meal or at bedtime, or even flipping pancakes on Shrove Tuesday.

But then the world happens, and I keep silent – conference calls, and neighborhood banter, and the usual commerce: grocery store check-outs, or restaurant meals, or a trip to the hardware store, or whatever the place of serious, objective decorum may be – I dare not speak of politics, and certainly not of faith. I'd best keep silent until a more appropriate time, a time that's better suited to be seen and heard.

And of course, the headlines show us unthinkable, unsolvable issues. Jesus may glow a divine shade on a mountaintop, but Rome will be no less vicious when he and the others come back down. And I'll bet those disciples think, "It's probably best to keep this in our back pockets for now. Besides, it's gonna take a miracle much bigger than what we've just seen to fix the world down here."

And I may feel the presence of God at the table, but there's so much work to do. How many people in Raleigh alone didn't have means to buy breakfast this morning? And we call ourselves Christian communities with open tables, but our denominations can't even settle on who can sit, and serve and be served, at our tables. I'm not sure my little moments of transfiguration can make a dent in such brokenness.

As we approach this season of Lent, we, like John and James and Peter, descend a mountaintop. The One we follow heads to Jerusalem. And

we'll go there, too. Jesus goes with the confidence that his voice and his actions – “God’s will be done, God’s kin-dom come, right now” – his voice, his actions, *his very living*, will transform a broken world.

And I think it begs the question: Do we believe that our lives can do the same?

We have known divine community here. That is certain. We have known and we continue to know the love of a creative, affectionate, healing God. That too, is certain. And the words, the stories, the love, the challenge, the hope, the redemptive power of Jesus have undergirded our hearts, minds, and souls. I am very much certain of that.

What then, do our voices say about this good God of ours? And what color do our bodies and actions transfigure? Do we sing a song of love? Do we beam with a divine white? Are we a reflection of God in the world? Do we allow ourselves to be transformed and transfigured? And stay transformed and transfigured?

Or are we still too occupied with the things not of God’s world? Are we lured by greed and power and status? Do we speak with a transactional voice? Have we redefined transfiguring to be that we simply change humanity into numbers or figures with arbitrary values? Are we somehow still contented with whiteness? Perhaps it’s a shade of orange or green that beckons our silence? Or maybe worst of all the disinterest and disillusionment of a washed-out gray? Are we simply a reflection or projection of all those systems who reject harmony, and equity, and possibility, and vibrance? Are we like that slime from Ghostbusters II (I know it’s been 40 years, but the franchise is still timeless!) that activates our deepest fears and projects our vilest emotions?

Don't Keep Silent
Transfiguration Sunday, 3/2/2025
Bob Stillerman
Luke 9:28-37



When we're high up on that mountaintop, we are transfigured by the truth of God. And yet all too often, when we come down the hill, we are curdled, preserved, hardened by the falseness of Caesar.

So again, I ask, "Do we, like Jesus, believe that our lives and voices can transform our world?"

One thing is certain Millbrook Baptist Church, our silence won't. And neither will our inaction."

May God give us strength to speak, and to act, and live as we've been called to, not just in the heights, but at the foot of a mountain, too

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May it be so, and may it be soon.

Amen.