

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. ³²Now 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. ³³Just 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. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶When 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.

Peter, James, and John have backstage passes to some of the most amazing moments. We saw them in the scene a couple of weeks ago when Jesus filled their fishing nets. We see them here on the mountaintop, and we’ll see them again in a few weeks at another prayerful moment in the Garden of Gethsemane. They always seem tired and overwhelmed, but I think I would be too if I was trying to keep up physically, mentally, and spiritually with Jesus.

And remember last week when I was speaking about the symbolic significance of being on a mountain versus being on a plain? For those of you who weren’t here, we compared the texts in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, Jesus was on a mountainside, and we talked about the importance of mountains in the Bible. How they literally brought you closer to God and that they were places in which it was easier to hear God’s voice. We remembered that Moses had heard the voice of God on Mount Sinai and that Elijah had heard the voice of God on a mountain as well. Well, I wanted to plant those seeds in your

mind, because while Luke had Jesus speaking on a flat plain last week for a specific reason, we see that Luke understands that there are mountaintop moments and plain moments, because in our text for today, he's got us at a higher elevation. The air is thinner, and spiritual things are happening, and low and behold! Moses and Elijah are back again, on the mountain.

In fact, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this mountaintop scene, and unlike last week's example that was full of differences, there is more in common with the three accounts of today's story than not, but we get Luke's version today, which I really like, because he's the only one who includes any hint as to what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are talking about. Verse 31 says, "They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem."

Now, if you're a Bible scholar, (and I know you are!) then you might have picked up on a key word here that is loaded with significance. It's the word "exodus." Moses, and Elijah were speaking with Jesus about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.

No one speaks about their exodus. We don't make small talk in the fellowship hall and say, "What are you doing this afternoon?" "Oh, me? I'm packing for my exodus. I leave tomorrow to visit my grandchildren in Colorado." "Ooh! Safe travels! Have a great exodus!"

No, when we hear the word exodus, we think first and foremost of the story told in the second book of our Bible, which bears the same name. We think of Moses and the Pharaoh, the ten plagues, and the parting of the water – the exodus.

But that word means something here. In many ways, what Jesus does is parallel to what Moses did. Jesus was not born into royalty, nor was Moses. Jesus performed signs and wonders, as did Moses. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. Moses forty years. Moses delivered the people from the bondage of slavery. Jesus would free people from the bondage of sin. There are parallels here, and so the word exodus is not a theological stretch but a solidarity with the past.

But what I want to really focus on today is not the geography of the mountain or the symbolic appearance of Moses and Elijah or even the theological exodus of Jesus freeing people from spiritual bondage. The transfiguration story comes up every year. I've got to save some stuff for later.

What I want to focus on today is the voice of God. God's voice only appears twice in the gospels, so when God speaks, we had better not miss it. In Luke chapter 3, Jesus is baptized, and he hears God's voice say, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In chapter 9, God says, "This is my Son, my beloved (or my Chosen); listen to him!"

In both cases, we have God claiming Jesus. Identifying Jesus as God's own and, I would imagine, that gives Jesus enormous confidence and peace. But in the first instance, it appears God is speaking directly to Jesus, "You are my Son" and in the second instance, God seems to be speaking to the disciples. "This is my Son."

At the baptism, God says, "with you I am well pleased." In the transfiguration scene, God commands the three disciples, "Listen to him!"

And that, my friends, is the phrase that has really stuck with me this week. "Listen to him!" To me, it sounds like a parent scolding a child. No idea how that thought entered my head, but so often, Peter doesn't listen well. He's impulsive and loud, and speaks up even when he's confused about what's going on, but he's so real and relatable. Peter has my full sympathy as a disciple, even while God is saying, "I gave you two ears and one mouth so you might listen twice as much as you speak."

But in all three accounts in the Bible, Peter interrupts the sacred conversation. What we're told in this story is that the disciples are tired. One account says Peter is confused. One says he just doesn't know what to say. Another says he's frightened.

So God interrupts Peter. As Peter is talking, a cloud rolls in, and they're caught up in the mist. God stops Peter and commands him to listen to Jesus.

Now, I understand this as both a command for what will happen going forward and also a reminder to not dismiss what he has been saying in the recent past. I think there's something there, and I want get your opinion on my thoughts.

What I wonder is if Peter perhaps is consciously or subconsciously still processing what Jesus had laid out about his own future just before this event. Because I want you to think about how our scene today began. It says, "Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took Peter John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray."

What drives me crazy is beginning a scripture reading with a reference to something that just happened. Like I've said before, scripture was intended to be heard in larger passages. Not chopped up the way we get it in church. And I don't expect you all to know what "the sayings" were. Eight days after "these sayings" . . . These sayings . . . is it a parable or the sermon on the plain we read last week or some interaction with the Pharisees? We don't know! We have zero context about how the sayings might have something to do with what Jesus was praying about, or how the disciples were feeling, or what questions they had, or why the ghosts of Moses and Elijah appeared.

So let's go back and figure out what was said eight days earlier!

If we go back to verse eighteen of the same chapter, we read about Jesus praying and asking his disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" ¹⁹They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." ²⁰Then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God."

Brilliant. Bold. And Faithful. Well done, Peter.

But Jesus responds to that lovely answer in a frightening way that no one expected. It says, "He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, ²² saying, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised."²³ Then he said to them all, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For

those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

Keep silent, don't tell the people that the Messiah is here. Hm. Not what the disciples wanted to hear. Suffering and rejection and death at the hands of the authorities? This is not what they had in mind at all. And oh, by the way, you will suffer, too. My goodness. This is really a miserable pep talk.

For the next eight days, there is a gap in the storyline. We don't know if Jesus was actively teaching and healing, if he was retreating and resting, or if the disciples were so stunned by this news that it took a week to process what he said. We don't know, but about a week after he gave them this horrible news, he retreated to a mountaintop and started glowing and chatting with ghosts.

So, I wonder today, based on the lack of any other context clues, if Peter, James, and John were still processing the news Jesus had shared eight days prior.

And if I were Peter, and Jesus had said, I will be rejected by the religious leaders, and then Moses and Elijah appeared and their very presence validated Jesus' claim as the Messiah, I would want the whole world to know about it. I would want to live-stream it on every social media platform around the world. And since that technology didn't exist, the next best thing was to keep the three of them there on the mountaintop for as long as possible so that as many people as possible could come and see for themselves that Jesus was endorsed by Moses and Elijah. I would tell myself that Jesus may have had a plan eight days ago, but now plans have changed! There's no reason whatsoever to head to Jerusalem! No need to enter the dangerous city and suffer and be killed. Stay right here where you're in your glory! Where you're shining! Let's keep the three of you together. I'll build some shelters, and we'll bring the people to you.

Certainly, even the religious authorities would recognize him as the Messiah then. Surely there would be no rejection in Jerusalem if the people could see the three of them together on the mountain. So stay, Moses! Wait, Elijah! Would you just hold on for a bit? I'll build you a comfortable, shady, place to rest. I'll bring you food? Do ghosts eat? Just don't

leave yet! Can you show me how to turn your staff into a snake again? Please? James, John, stall them! Help me! We can show the world who Jesus is! We don't have to suffer!

And then the voice of God interrupts Peter. "This is my Son, my beloved Son, my chosen One; listen to him!"

Listen? Listen to what? That he plans on going to Jerusalem to suffer and die? No thank you. Listen to what? That we must suffer, too? Nope. I don't want to listen to that. I want power. I want security. I want to live. I want to be at the right hand of the Messiah when he is enthroned as the King of the Jews. I like his shiny outfit. That would get people talking if they could see it!

Peter is just so relatable to me. I'm not excited about the idea of Jesus suffering. I'm not thrilled that we're called to take up our own cross and follow. But that's what's about to happen. We're turning a corner here. On Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we will remind ourselves of our own mortality. We will have an opportunity to receive ashes and offer ourselves as companions of Jesus on the journey to Jerusalem. We will not stay on the mountaintop where we are confident that we will be safe and sound. In fact, Jesus commands us not to tell anyone about what happened. He is headed to Jerusalem to do what must be done. And we are called to go with him.

Do not be afraid, friends. This is what must be, and Jesus will be with us, always. Just as Moses as Elijah were with him. Amen.