

Circle of Mercy Sermon
Luke 9:28-36 (The Transfiguration)
“Listen: You May Not Need Eyes to See.”
02/07/16

Today’s text is a doozie. After Nancy’s story with the children with the fog and bright lights, you may not hear a word that I say.

Have any of you listened to the NPR show/podcast Invisibilia? It is a spin-off of This American Life. In Latin, Invisibilia means “all the invisible things.” The show “explores the intangible forces that shape human behavior – things like ideas, beliefs, assumptions and emotions.” I was obsessed with this show last year. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Actually, I’m still a little obsessed with it.

There was one episode in particular that captured my attention, “How to Become Batman.” It was about a blind man, Daniel Kish, who lost his sight as a young child. Both of his eyes were removed because he had retinoblastoma – eye cancer. However, his mother didn’t treat him differently because he couldn’t see. Certainly, she was by no means negligent. She created as safe of an environment that we hope would be created for any child, regardless of their physical abilities or limitations.

But Daniel’s mom definitely WAS NOT a helicopter parent. She didn’t rescue him from every situation. He got scratches and bruises. He lost a few teeth running into a pole on the playground. She encouraged his independence. He learned how to navigate the world by echolocating – making clicking noises that enabled him to navigate any environment where he found himself. He did what kids do. He climbed trees. He rode bikes. He could see, but not with his eyes.

“For decades scientists assumed that the visual cortex (part of the brain) goes dark when you are blind.”¹ In a study that took MRI’s of what happened in the brains blind people who echolocated specific objects and compared them to MRI’s of sighted people who received the exact same instructions, the evidence was surprising.

As was the case of other blind people observed in this study, the visual cortex of Daniel’s brain, rather than being dark, “lit up like a disco ball.”² The person interviewing Daniel asked him to take out his prosthetic eyes to prove that he didn’t have any vision, in the sense of how we typically think about that word, but that he was seeing without actual eyes.

Daniel now works with families to help children learn to echolocate to be able to navigate their environments with relative ease. What he has learned though, is that he is mostly training the parents of children to allow their kids to get to approach thresholds of what is known to them, to teach them to trust what they “see” with their other senses – primarily through hearing and echolocating but also through other senses, such as touch, that are heightened for them. Because

¹ <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/544/transcript>

² <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/544/transcript>

of what caregivers see, their fear makes them jump in too quickly, robbing the blind child of the chance to train their other senses, to allow their bodies to read and to recognize those liminal spaces in order to navigate the world on their own.

I want to note that the setting for most of the interview with Daniel was on a hike with Daniel leading his interviewer up a steep mountain that included narrow paths, sometimes on the edges of cliffs that dropped off hundreds of feet below. The interviewer watched Daniel come frighteningly close to the edge of the path, pausing at the precise moment that the interviewers heart began to race in fear that he would topple over the edge.

I don't even know how to get my head around the idea that is the premise of this story: that blindness is a social construct. I encourage you to take them time to listen to this podcast that actually ended up being a short series, including some follow up conversations with Daniel.

The transfiguration story is filled with mystery and confusion, and just like Daniel's story, leaves me with more questions than answers. Partly, I think that is because I have been trying (maybe a little to hard) to figure out how to explain it and how to create a sermon around it this week.

Transfiguration Sunday is a transition between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent and this threshold between liturgical seasons is significant to our conversation about our text today. Epiphany is defined as "an intuitive grasp of reality through something usually simple and striking; an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure."³

The season of Epiphany is not a single event. Epiphany holds stories about moments of new understanding, experiences that shed light on something in a new way, and transformative events that were clarifying for the people involved. From the magi following the star to John the Baptist announcing the arrival of the promised one to Jesus' baptism to the calling of the disciples – Epiphany builds up momentum through these events that help clear the way and shed more light upon God's presence in the world – culminating in this mountaintop story with Jesus and the disciples – the Transfiguration.

The transfiguration and the events leading up to it are anything but clarifying. They seem to raise more questions than they give answers.

We should note a couple of things that happen around the story of the Transfiguration in Luke. First, Jesus has been preparing the disciples for the work that they were going to be doing: instructing them to take nothing with them, to go where they were welcomed, and to shake the dust off their feet when they left the places where hospitality was not extended to them.⁴

The opening verses of Luke 9 say, "Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." (Luke 9:1-2)

³ Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of "epiphany."

⁴ Luke 9:3-5

Do you notice that? Jesus had ALREADY given them the power and authority to deliver the Good News and to do the work of healing in the communities where they were traveling. And they were doing these very things – to the extent that even King Herod took notice. He heard about what was happening and started to question who it was that was behind these works of healing that were drawing large crowds of people.

The second thing to note is that the series of events leading up the transfiguration story show Jesus continuing to teach the disciples more about who he was, revealing himself more fully to them. He seemed to be curious about who the disciples were listening to and what they were hearing people say about him, so he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”⁵ They answered, telling him that some people were saying he was Elijah and some were saying he was John the Baptist. (It is no wonder that when King Herod heard talk of John the Baptist from the crowds that his ears perked up. Herod had given the orders for John to be beheaded. Herod was sure that John was dead.)

Jesus then asked the disciples directly, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, the impulsive one, immediately answered, “You are the Messiah.”⁶ Jesus replied with a stern warning for them not to tell anyone and began to speak of the suffering and rejection he would face, his death and his resurrection.

Given the rest of this story, I imagine Jesus’ words about the events that would unfold in the days ahead were met with blank stares. They didn’t understand. How could they? Jesus was their leader, their teacher and their friend. Their minds, hearts and bodies were present WITH him. They were not ready to even consider the possibility of not being WITH him.

Which brings us to our central story for today:

Three of the disciples (Peter, James and John) went up to a mountaintop with Jesus because Jesus needed to get away, to have some distance from the crowds that were beginning to press in upon them. Once they arrived at the top of the mountain, Jesus immediately started to do what he had gone there to do – to pray. The disciples, well, they started to do what they usually did while Jesus was praying – they went to sleep.

While the disciples were snoozing, the appearance of Jesus’ face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Then, two other people appeared with him. The two people turned out to be Moses and Elijah and they were talking with Jesus about what was ahead of him – Jesus’ own exodus story of sorts. But, it seems that the disciples completely missed that part while they were sleeping.

They almost missed the whole thing. When they woke up, bleary-eyed they caught a glimpse of the two people standing with Jesus, just before the people started to leave. Quickly taking in what they were seeing, impulsive Peter jumped into high gear, just like the parent of the blind

⁵ Luke 9:18

⁶ John 9:20

child, intending to protect the child, reaches out to grab her in one of those liminal spaces – where she really needed to be present, to learn to be fully aware of her surroundings.

Peter certainly sensed that something important had just happened, and he responded by suggesting that they should build some dwelling places right there where they were – one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah so that they could stay.

But as Peter was blurting out his ideas about what they needed to do, a thick cloud surrounded them on the mountain. They were scared – understandably. People had appeared and then disappeared. Jesus was glowing. A cloud started to surround them. And if that weren't enough, a voice began speak from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him."

Wait, what? Listen to him? Listen. Really?

Given the dramatic visual effects in this story, it seems really strange that the voice from the cloud instructed them simply to listen. They had just witnessed an overwhelming, frightening visual experience – an experience where they were not sure about what they were or were not seeing. It was mysterious and intriguing enough to make Peter suggest that they build some permanent dwelling places, so that they could remain there.

And I suspect that, if I had been there, I would have been trying to go back through the details – asking myself, "What is happening? What did we just see?" I think I would have been trying to recount what I had just witnessed – making sure that what I remembered matched up with what the others with me had seen. I would probably be trying to figure out how in the world we would explain this to anybody else.

And then the voice called out, "Listen." It doesn't say, "Take a picture of this or build a house to stay here. It doesn't even say, "Remember all that you have seen so that you can run back down the mountain and get the crowds all stirred up, by describing in vivid detail what you have witnessed."

The command was simple, "Listen." Jesus even told them not to tell anyone about what they had seen.

I imagine their walk back down the mountain was a quiet one.

But as soon as they arrived at the foot of the mountain, surrounded by the crowds once again, they encountered a man who brought his son to Jesus. His son had been seized by a spirit, a spirit that made him have convulsions and foam at the mouth and that mauled him. He told Jesus, "I have begged your disciples to cast it out but they could not."⁷

Jesus' initial response took me a little off guard, "You faithless and perverse generation, how long must I be with you and bear you?" At first, it seems like he is responding rather harshly to this man who is desperately seeking healing for his son.

⁷ Luke 9:38-40

But, when we consider again the very beginning of this chapter of Luke, “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal,”⁸ we realize that he may actually be referring to the disciples.

He had already given them the power to do this work. But, for some reason they either 1) didn’t respond to this father’s pleading or 2) they tried to heal the boy and failed. We don’t know. Either way, Jesus’ frustration is palpable in that moment. Jesus proceeds to heal the boy and return him to his father. Once again, Jesus was in the spotlight.

He tried again to tell the disciples about his rejection and suffering, his death and resurrection. And, once again they didn’t understand. They were afraid to ask him what he meant. But a few verses later, what they weren’t afraid to ask him was who would be the greatest among them.

Can’t you imagine the sinking feeling that Jesus must have had at that moment and the heaviness of his heart as he watched those closest to him unable to truly hear anything that he was trying to tell them.

Instead, they seemed to be building their houses and residing in the arguments about which of them would be the greatest, the least of Jesus’ concerns. They were still seeing through the lenses of the values of the world. They were operating out of the most familiar definition of greatness that would elevate one of them above the others.

And so, accompanied by this rag-tag group of followers who may or may not ever really get it, Jesus then set his face toward Jerusalem.

With the events that followed Jesus, Peter, James and John’s return from the mountain in mind, I want us to back up for just a moment. Remember the voice from the cloud, “This is my son, my Chosen. Listen to him.”

Jesus had been trying to prepare the disciples for what was ahead. But they couldn’t hear him. They didn’t understand.

As God spoke the command to “listen” to the three disciples who were with Jesus, could it have been the offering of an invitation into a deeper awareness of the presence of the divine, an awareness and experience that they would need to store in their minds and bodies, that they would need to return to, that they would need to be able to recall in order to interpret the events that would unfold around them in the days ahead?

We know the arc of the larger story. What they would see with their eyes would not reflect what they expected or wanted. What they would see with their eyes might draw their attention away from their central work that Jesus had already empowered them to do. What they would see with

⁸ Luke 9:1

their eyes might not look anything like what they understood the in-breaking of God's spirit into the world to be.

Their experience on the mountain consumed each of them in body, mind and spirit. It was a deeply visual, bodily experience in the midst of which they were in the presence of Jesus in a moment when he became more of who he already was right in front of them. Yes, he was still their friend and teacher who had walked up the mountain with them. But, he was also part of the presence of God that held deep mystery and holiness – so much so that it was almost too much for them to look at and take in on the mountain.

What they would see with their eyes that would unfold around them, primarily Jesus – their friend and teacher facing rejection, suffering and death, could mirror their experience on the mountain in some ways. It could be too much for them to look at and take in to watch their friend being rejected and suffering. If they chose to build a dwelling place to remain in those moments, death might be the final word for them too. If they resided in what they saw with their eyes, it would overshadow the things that Jesus had already empowered them to do.

But what they witnessed on the mountaintop created a opportunity for them to form a new neural pathway that they would be able to call upon and access in the days ahead – if they could really allow themselves to take it in, store it in body, mind and spirit. The voice called out to them, “Listen to him.” He is already telling you what you need to know. Don't be distracted by the bright lights and smoke. Trust your other senses, not just what you see. Listen.

Echolocate. Be ready to get right up on the edge of those liminal spaces, those thresholds that scare us to death when we look too closely with our eyes. When we look too closely with our eyes, we might start the tape in our minds that tells us all the reasons that we should run away in fear. When we look too closely with our eyes, we pull our companions back from the edge in the very moments that they need to take one more step in order to create those neural pathways for themselves that heighten their other senses.

If we choose to reside solely in the places that we can see with our eyes – the places that remind us of all the reasons that we should be afraid, we will certainly miss the unlimited opportunities to live fully, in the fullness of God.

As we leave the season of Epiphany, the season of illumination and enter into the season of Lent, let us consider what it is that keeps us or hinders us from listening and locating ourselves in relationship to God and each other. How might we listen more attentively and approach those liminal spaces that offer us the opportunity to live fully, in the fullness of God?

Listen. Listen. Listen.

Amen.