

It's A Strange Story

Every year, on the 7th Sunday before Easter, we reflect on 2 editions of this strange story. The first transfiguration story from the book of Exodus, the second from the Gospel appointed for the particular year – this year since it's Matthew's year, from the Gospel of Matthew. This strange story always ends the season of Epiphany, since it recounts a major story of God's light breaking into and over humanity.

A Bible trivia aficionado, or your crazy pastor, will pose the question, who is the only character who appears in all the transfiguration stories of the Bible? No, it's not Jesus – it's Moses. Check all editions of the transfiguration stories to be sure.

There are other commonalities among the transfiguration stories, the mountain, and the cloud covering the mountain, the glory of the Lord. Joshua, Moses' assistant is paralleled by Jesus' disciples Peter, James and John. In Exodus, Moses received the law, and in the gospels, Moses symbolizes the law. In Exodus, Moses entered the cloud, went up the mountain and remained there 40 days. In the gospels, we not only hear of the great light, we also hear a voice "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him." words we also heard at the moment of baptism. Oh yes, and in the gospels, according to the baptismal story, Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness.

I know that you know that the season of Lent, that time of lengthening days, the season of penitence, fasting and prayer begins officially this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, some 46 days prior to Easter.

Some church calendar trivia. Why 46 days? Is not Lent supposed to be a mirror of those 40 day periods, when Moses was on the mountain with God, when Jesus was in the wilderness with God? Yes.

Lent is a 40 season of fasting and prayer, but every Sunday is to be a celebration of the Resurrection, no Sunday is a day of fasting. When we count from Easter backward, we discount the Sundays and arrive at Ash Wednesday. Yes! I am hoping that most of you will be here Wednesday evening for our Ash

Wednesday service.

All of that said, I want to give you fair warning. Lent is my favorite liturgical season, so this year, I am delighted to announce that we, the First Congregational Church of East Hartford will observe forty-two days of Lent this year, since our first Lenten luncheon is today. I've had a sneak preview of the chili – today is no day for fasting in this church!

How might we hear this strange story as we adjourn to a Lenten luncheon, and more importantly as we move into the wonderful and holy season of Lent? I want to lift up these words.

“From the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, and I love him. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!’

6 When the disciples heard this, they were terrified. They fell with their faces to the ground. 7 But Jesus came and touched them. ‘Get up,’ he said. ‘Don’t be afraid.’ 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.”

It is clear that God, the voice from the cloud, is speaking, not to Jesus, but rather God is speaking to the disciples, Peter, James and John then, hence to us, disciples, students, followers of Jesus today.

God’s first words establish Jesus’ credentials, his identity. “This is my beloved child, he delights my heart.” Therefore, you – James, Peter, and John: therefore you - people who are First Church ... Therefore, listen to him.”

Friends, when you attend a concert, once the lights go down, once the conductor lifts the baton, do you keep talking?

When you visit the doctor and she comes in to explain the details of your treatment plan, do you keep talking?

When Smith Barney speaks do you keep talking, or do you listen?

“This is my beloved child; listen to him.”

How do you become quiet? How do you practice silence? How do you become quiet enough to listen to Jesus? When do you stop talking and become quiet enough hear Jesus?

Do you listen to him by lovingly, quietly, slowly spending time with the scriptures?

Do you listen to him by watching the world around you through the lens of Sunday's gospel lesson?

Do you hear him speaking through the dreams that come during your sleep?

Do you listen to him by wearing a WWJD bracelet, a cross, or having reminders posted on the fridge, or framed and hanging on a wall?

This week let's try writing these words, "listen to him!" on a post-it note, then sticking the post-it on the shade of the last light you turn out before sleeping each night. Imagine hearing God's direction, "listen to him!" just as we settle into sleep each evening. Might that help us stop talking and listen to Jesus?

When the disciples heard this they fell to the ground overcome by fear. Jesus touched them, saying "Get up. Don't be afraid."

Friends, if we do not become quiet, more bluntly put, if we do not shut up and listen, how will we ever hear the love in his touch and his words, "be not afraid." God is still speaking, reminding us, "listen to him."

When the disciples heard this they fell to the ground overcome by fear. Jesus touched them, saying "Get up. Don't be afraid."

When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

Friends, let me ask, "Where is the focus of someone who falls to the ground out of fear?" I suspect their focus is on their fear, rather than anything or any one else.

In their fear, what did Jesus do? It says, *Jesus touched them, saying "Get up. Don't be afraid."* Can we rephrase that last sentence to, "When they came out of their fear, their focus shifted away from their fear, to Jesus. "They saw no one except Jesus, himself alone." Can we say "Their focus shifted from fear, to Love."?

Friends, if we go to sleep at night with the admonition, "Listen to him" in our sight and on our hearts, I believe it is reasonable to expect that we might arise in the morning with our intention and will focused solely upon Jesus, which is to say, with our intention and will focused solely upon love.

Think about what a real focus on love might mean to you in your relationships, with your spouse or children, with yourself in your body, with creation, with your neighbors. Think about it for a moment. How might a focus upon love become a source of growth and healing for you?

Furthermore, I believe that we can take a step to reinforce that focus on love. Being the human beings that we are with human bodies that function as human bodies will, I believe that if we post one post-it note calling ourselves to “listen to him” on the last lamp we put out before sleep; and if we post a second note on the mirror of the bathroom, saying “love” we will greatly reinforce our focus on love. Surely for most of us, the bathroom is our first destination each and every day.

To that end, I have placed two post it notes in your bulletins. I invite – no, I challenge – no, I dare you to write “Listen to him” on one and stick it to your bedside lamp. And I double-dog dare you to write “love” on the other and post it on your bathroom mirror, or at least on the refrigerator door.

Try it and see what happens. Try it as a grand experiment on these few extra days of Lent given to us by an early Lenten luncheon. Try it as a way of seeing what happens when we take ahold of this strange story and make it part of our lives and living. Try it as a way of listening to Jesus, and therefore placing our focus on love.

Amen