

“Listen to Him”
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Second - Ponce de Leon Baptist Church
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Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!” 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.

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹ Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹ Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” ⁴² While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

You may have seen this on the news – a couple of weeks ago, Serena Williams and a few other friends, rented the penthouse of The Mark Hotel in New York City, to host a baby shower for Megan Markle and her royal child-to-be. Paparazzi was stirring, camera flashes everywhere, hoping to get that one special shot of the expecting princess. One clever photographer skipped the elbowing crowd at the hotel entrance, and he set up a long-distance video lens at the airport - to catch the royal mama boarding the private jet on her way back to England. I saw his footage on two different news outlets. He’d done it – he’d scored the footage that would land him the cash to make it for a while longer.

But still, the payday could have been more if some photographer or videographer had gotten a shot that was more intimate. Intimacy sells. By intimacy, I don’t necessarily mean racy. You might could retire with a few pictures of Ryan Gosling brushing his teeth or Taylor Swift

popping a zit. And yet, in the world of selfies and Facebook, I'm surprised that anything is still private or intimate. I'm not very active on Facebook, but when I do sign in, I get to see my friend's redone bathroom, a posting about how fried cauliflower gives me cramps, or updates on the bunion with before and after pictures.

Which is why we might find it hard to relate to an experience so holy that nobody told what they saw. About eight days before today's story took place, and right after feeding the five thousand, Jesus was alone with the disciples and Jesus turns to one of them and asks, "*Who do the crowds say that I am?*" They answered, "*John the Baptist; but others Elijah; and still others that one of the ancient prophets has arisen*". He said to them, "*But who do you say that I am?*" Peter answered, "*The Messiah of God.*" And now, just eight days and a few verses later, Jesus has retreated to prayer and this same Peter, along with John and James, went up the mountain with him, but they soon fell off to sleep.

But when they woke, they woke into an experience like none they had ever experienced. Jesus' face was changed, his clothes became a dazzling white and in his company were two men, Moses and Elijah. Moses, who is the symbol of the Ten Commandments, the Law of Israel – and Elijah who stands for the prophets of Israel. Symbols of all of the redemptive Jewish history, in one scene full of glory, and talking about Jesus' exodus, his departure that was soon to happen in Jerusalem.

And as the two men left Jesus, the impetuous Peter says, "*Master, it is wonderful for us to be here! Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.*"

You remember that he's also the one who blurted an answer when Jesus asked, "*And who do you say that I am?*" Peter is a man of action. And while he was making his case that they needed this on record, "*Get the video camera out of the basement, let's build three tabernacles, hey, how about a plaque right over there...*" – a great cloud like the cloud that led the Israelites by day in the wilderness, a cloud of God's presence and leadership, enveloped them so that they could barely see each other for the fog of presence and then a voice spoke from within the cloud. The voice was heard by all and they all agreed that the voice in the cloud said to them, "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*"

And as the cloud lifted - Moses, the embodiment of the law, is no longer there. Elijah, the embodiment of the prophetic witness is not there. Jesus is alone, the Son of God, the Chosen of God – he stands alone as the unique Son of God and the voice of God's presence declares, "*Listen to him.*"

And these three men, including Peter, who is known for running his mouth, told no one what they had seen.

Can you imagine? Not one of them called home or posted this on Facebook. You and I would have been asking Moses for a selfie. If we are inclined to post pictures every time we grill out or videos of every cute dog trick, then wouldn't we tell everybody on our friend list that we had just experienced this remarkable miracle of God? But they didn't. Until after the resurrection, they did not tell a soul.

But maybe we wouldn't tell either. Because there are some things so intimate, so personal, that we don't talk about it. I have friends who will post pictures of their surgical incision or before and after make-up pictures, who will not tell you about their true life-dreams or the time they got their heart broken or the times they encountered God. Maybe because some things just seem too personal to utter. But sometimes we do not speak about our holy moments because we don't want people to think we are going crazy.

In a few cases, some of you have trusted me with your holy stories and the story often starts with, *"I don't want you to think I'm a nut or that I'm losing it but..."* Well, I never think that. I have walked the halls of faith long enough to have heard enough stories of enough God sightings to know. God does, sometimes, break through the ordinary and gift us with a flash of eternal presence.

I was, I think, 17 years old and at my grandmother's house in Greenwood, SC. Life for me, at the time, was a swirling chaos. I didn't understand Algebra but had to somehow pull a "C" to graduate. (I wished Pythagoras had kept his theories to himself.) Diana Jolly just wanted to be friends, which is not what I wanted, I had enough friends and none of them looked anything like Diana. I was an insecure 112 pounds, trying to fake it. My family was pressing on me about college and career and I was feeling the pressure to make major life-shaping decisions. Nothing in my life felt ordered or nailed down.

Then, I went to Mama's house where nothing had changed. Nothing. My adolescent outer world and inner world were in a vortex, but, when I walked through that door, every porcelain thing was in its place and the house smelled of cooked sausage and the Happy Goodman Family 8-Track played the same songs as they did when life was simpler. And that night, in the guest room, with the attic fan clacking, and the wind pulling in the screen, I sat on the side of the bed, with my chin propped on my crossed arms on the window sill, and I stared out into the backyard, full of blackness and crickets, and I prayed. Something happened. No voice, no cloud, no Moses – but God showed up. I felt enveloped by a warm love that I could not explain. The chaos felt distant and manageable. The spinning stopped. My insecurities were lost in the enveloping warmth. I felt no fear. *"Some things are sure. This house has the same brown furniture coverings, Mama is in the next room and she has always loved me, God is here; God loves me too. I'm okay."*

I learned many years later, in seminary, that there is a theological term for what happened in the windowsill and the darkness, it is called *"theophany"*. Theophany is when God shows up in a personal and holy encounter. And, the next morning, when I stumbled into the kitchen for grits and biscuits and blackberry jam, I did not jabber about what I had experienced. Some things are just so intimate that it can feel like it cheapens it if you try to put language to it.

When Peter and John and James were on that mountain and they saw Moses and they saw Elijah and then the presence of God covered them in a cloud of presence and they heard a voice say, *"This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"* When that life-altering gift of God's presence was lifted, they did not say a word to anyone about what they had seen.

Encounter is what our soul craves. We keep coming back into this big room each week, built high so that there is at least some room for the hem of God's garment to pass in front of us. Spacious enough that when we pray, "*Come Holy Spirit, Come*" that there is some open air between us for God's spirit to blow. We come each week wanting encounter. We've had enough of explanations and Paul's missionary itinerary, we want God to show up. We want the racket in our mind to go quiet, we want to unplug the merry-go-round, so that we might experience/encounter the life source that so often seems distant. And, sometimes we do. Sometimes, sitting here in worship, in the stillness and reflection of our worship, we see the patterns, the order to life. We recalibrate our values against the holiness of God, and sometimes we get a peek at the eternal, sometimes we glimpse the sacred, and there is enough holy magic in it to help us move forward.

But we don't stop the ordinary and set up tabernacles as Peter suggested. We don't just sit in a lotus position and passively wait for God's next breakthrough – the command from the cloud of presence was, "*listen to him.*" Hear and follow the life of Jesus in the world.

The next day, in our scripture, the three who had been in the hush of God's cloud, the very next day they had to deal with a pressing crowd, a frantic dad, a sick kid, and a demon. Following our encounters with God, we still must enter back into the ordinary too. I came home from Greenwood and still did not know how to calculate the area of a triangle, I still weighed 112 pounds, and Diana was dating Tommy. The temptation is to want to froth up another encounter, but we know better. We live open to the ways God is breaking through and we learn that theophany often happens when we least expect it. Moses and Elijah and the cloud of God's presence showed up on a hillside during naptime, not on one of the high holy days in the temple. Sometimes, sometimes we do get God's gift of encounter in this sacred room. Part of the hush of our worship, with organ and stillness and space for reflection is so that for one hour a week we might not be assaulted. For one hour we might rest in this safe space and open up our lives to the presence of God, and sometimes God answers with a whisper of personal encounter. But God also shows up in unusual places if we are conditioned to look. In our scripture, theophany happened on a hillside during naptime. So, we too, look for ways that God is breaking through at Kroger, or soccer practice or while holding hands watching Jeopardy. But our first task is not running here and there chasing encounter, it is living the instruction – "*listen to him.*" Hear and follow the life of Jesus in the world. The cloud of God's presence will show up when it will – you don't manufacture it.

Today might be a day of first encounter for you, your first awareness of the love of God in Christ. You may want to talk with one of the ministers about what it means to "*listen to him*" – to live trying to follow the life of Jesus in the world.

Or, you may be ready to join your life with us and join this church today. We show up every week to worship the God of eternity and to try to bend our lives a little closer to being the most loving version of ourselves. This happens in community and we invite you to join us on the life-giving journey of faith.