

## **“Sometimes God Has to Shout”**

**Mark 9:2–9**

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I cannot count the number of times Dana’s father has complained about something the men’s basketball coach of my alma mater does — he yells at the players. “I wish he wouldn’t yell at those boys,” Dan says, and though we don’t like yelling, we try to explain why he yells. In normal times, with the crowds roaring, they cannot hear him unless he does. And often, even when they hear him, they don’t listen to what he is saying. Sometimes it takes something extra to get strong-willed, know-it-all young men to listen. Of course, this year with my alma mater, even yelling hasn’t helped. Our only hope is that COVID precautions might end the season and put us out of our misery. Still, Dan doesn’t like the yelling, but sometimes a coach has to yell.

Sometimes, so does God. There are times when God speaks through a still small voice, as God does to Elijah on the mountain in 1 Kings 19, but there are times when God has to yell, or perhaps we might prefer the term *shout*, as God does in today’s story of transfiguration. The text does not say the voice from a cloud shouts at Peter, James and John, but the effect is the same. God brings out all the whistles and bells to get their attention. They may have thought they were out for a hike with Jesus or perhaps a customary time of prayer. But when they get up the mountain, it becomes clear that something more is happening.

Jesus is transfigured, changed not in the essence of who he is but in his outer appearance. Until now, his divinity has been veiled. But in this moment, his clothes become dazzling white, Elijah and Moses appear, a cloud overshadows them, and a voice speaks from the cloud, saying, “This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!” “Listen to him!” is the punchline here, the point of this elaborate unveiling of glory, but it is elaborate, which is to say God has gone to extremes to make a point. And the reason why God has, the reason God has to shout in this way, is that the disciples haven’t been listening.

They think they have, of course, just like we think we listen for the voice of Christ. They have chosen to leave everything in order to follow him. They obviously must hold him in high regard. He teaches them many things and they listen. They observe his miraculous acts of healing and they are still with him. What is the problem?

Well, one brief encounter tells us everything we need to know. Just before they go up the mountain, Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is and then, who they say he is. To the first question, they reply, “John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets,” and to the second, Peter replies, “You are the Messiah.”

It is the correct answer, so far so good, but then, Jesus proceeds to tell them what kind of Messiah he is, that he will undergo great suffering, be killed, and rise again on the third day. At this point, Peter blows a gasket and rebukes Jesus — suffering and death are not in the script for the Messiah — whereupon Jesus rebukes Peter and says, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Peter and the others listen to Jesus until he says something they neither expect nor want to hear, and then, they no longer listen. It may seem odd that they choose to follow him and even call him Messiah but then argue with his teaching, indeed more than argue, reject it completely. But we too have chosen to follow this itinerant Nazarene rabbi, we have claimed him as Messiah with even more understanding of the term than the disciples have at this point, yet how do we respond when he says something we neither expect nor want to hear? Do we listen, really listen, which means that we take his teachings to heart and follow them? We are too polite and pious to reject his teaching outright. So, we interpret it away or offer excuses for why it doesn't apply to us.

I have shared with some of you before a story about an experience a predecessor of mine in another setting had. He preached a sermon in the 1960s on the brotherhood of all men. Today we would be more gender inclusive, but he was addressing racial issues at a time when these issues were very emotional yet also critical — not unlike this time. At the end of the service, a prominent member of the church said this to the pastor. “You said something today I don't ever want to hear you say

again. You said that (nigger) is my brother. I don't ever want to hear you say that again." The pastor, not a timid soul, looked at the man calmly and said, "Well then, the way I see it, you have two choices. You can convince me I'm wrong, which I don't think you can do, or you can quit coming to church here." The man walked away in a huff, but continued coming to church about as frequently as he had before.

Setting aside what we might think about the pastor's response, the man's choice of words was telling. You said something I don't want to hear... There are many things we all don't want to hear — because they challenge our worldview, because they hit close to home, because they call into question some belief we have been convinced is of God but may not be, because they threaten to turn our world upside down and we like things the way they are or at least have become accustomed to them.

We don't want to hear about racial equality or new perspectives on sexual identity or the possibility that people of other faiths may know God. We don't want to hear about economic inequality or climate change. We don't want to hear Jesus' words about forgiving those who hurt us, loving our enemies, visiting the prisoner and welcoming the stranger. We might not tell off Jesus as we would a preacher. We might not even tell off the preacher to his or her face, not when we can tell someone else or send an email or post on social media. But one way or another, we will tune out what we don't want to hear even if it is of God.

So, sometimes God has to shout, perhaps through a pointed word like my predecessor's in another setting or some major life event. And to be clear, the word we struggle to hear does not always present the same kind of challenge. Sometimes our mind has to be opened — what we thought about people of a different race and our relationship to them was simply wrong. Sometimes our will needs to change — we know what we need to do to become healthier, happier and closer to God; we just struggle to do it. And sometimes the word from God needs to penetrate our heart — especially when it comes to self-acceptance.

At the center of the Gospel lies the claim that we are loved by God just as we are. Nothing we can do will ever make God love us any more and nothing we can do will ever make God love us any less. We are all precious in God's sight. Yet many people struggle to accept this claim.

Some are marked in early childhood, belittled so often and so profoundly that they spend their entire lives searching for a blessing they never receive or accept. It doesn't matter how much they accomplish or how many people affirm them and love them. It doesn't matter how often they are told that God embraces them in love, they may even accept this on a cognitive level. But deep down they still feel like they are nothing. Somehow God has to shout for them to hear.

Others are bombarded by cultural messages that tell them their worth is based on things like accomplishment, acquisition and appearance. Parents may suggest otherwise, the church at its best certainly does. It's what we are like inside that matters, our character — things like honesty, compassion, kindness, mercy, perseverance and a longing to help others — but we are precious, loved by God, even if all of these things are a work-in-progress. Yet how can a person believe that when every commercial, every image, every cultural message says otherwise? The truth has to be declared boldly. God has to shout.

I think of the storyline in the old Christmas film "It's a Wonderful Life." Kindhearted banker George Bailey thinks all is lost when a huge deposit is misplaced and his bank looks like it will go bankrupt, thus leaving a whole community of friends destitute. He gets drunk, wrecks his car and then decides to take his own life, but an oddball angel named Clarence shows up to try and talk him out of it. George thinks his life doesn't matter, so Clarence's brilliant strategy is to show him the world that would have existed without him, the ways all the people in his family and circle of friends would have lived without his influence.

The strategy works. Many lives have been profoundly shaped by George Bailey. His absence will leave a great emptiness. So, he returns to his family and friends — I think I am safe revealing the ending, since most of us have seen the movie a hundred times — and they all shower him with love and financial gifts to rebuild the bank. They are not angry with him; they are relieved and overjoyed that he is okay.

It is just a Hollywood film, the details are fantastical, but the message is genuine. We all matter immensely, but sometimes we are moved to question this reality. When we are, it often takes something bordering on the fantastical to get our attention and convince us. God

may not send a literal angel — though the term simply means “messenger” — but God will find some way, even if it requires shouting, to make sure we know our true worth.

And yet, sometimes God has to shout to us not only as individuals but as a church. What word might God have for the church in this time, our church? How willing are we to listen, even if the message is not easy to hear? When and how might God need to shout? In his book *Prayers*, French Abbe Michel Quoist says that God speaks to us through all of life, but we are rarely open to God’s message. How might we learn to hear and see what God wants us to hear and see?

We are living in a *Kairos* time, to use a biblical term, a time of much significance, a time of many paradigm shifts. How should the church respond to all of this? How do we discern God calling us to respond — to the tensions that come with increasing ethnic diversity, to the ideological and political division that threatens our 245-year experiment in democracy, to the questions raised by science, to the rapid increase of “nones” who identify with no faith, to the fact that we live in the center of not just North Carolina public life but one of the fastest growing cities in America? If God speaks through all of life, God is shouting to us right now, but what is God saying, what is God calling us to do and be, and how do we discern this call?

I am not proposing to answer all of these questions near the very end of an already long-enough sermon. I wouldn’t even propose to have all the answers. We have to discern questions like these as a church. I am simply suggesting that we begin to address these questions or at least the basic question of what we sense God calling us to do and be.

To be more intentional about this, we are forming a group to guide a process of discernment, to refresh and update in a different way the kind of visioning we did several years ago. The catalyst for this endeavor is the ongoing facilities assessment process. As we have begun to focus more intensely on certain possibilities, it has become clear that everything we do, including anything related to facilities, needs to be driven by a sense of calling and purpose, not just brick and mortar, dollars and cents. And in the church, it’s not just what we might envision doing, but of what we discern God calling us to do.

It will be an exciting adventure yet also a challenging one that will inevitably require us to make some changes. But it is essential that we do if we are to fulfill our calling. The church needs to speak and act more prophetically in regard to racial justice and economic inequality, the church can be a vehicle of healing for a broken nation, and we want the church to exist in fifty years, but all of these things will require change, not simply doing what we have been doing a little better.

Even after Peter, James and John witness the transfiguration, realize Jesus is more than an ordinary man, and are told to listen to him, they still struggle. They have gained some clarity, but they will still resist the way of the cross. Who wouldn't? But they have turned a corner at this point, as has Jesus, and there is no turning back. Our process of discernment is also ongoing, but there are key occasions, watershed moments, transfiguration experiences in which God shouts to us as individuals and as a church. May we be willing to listen.