

“What Else Are We Missing?”

Luke 9:28–36

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While delivering a graduation address last year at a high school in Esopus, New York, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik told a story about a musical experiment conducted some years ago: “the Stradivarius at the Subway” he called it (*Plough Quarterly*, Winter 2025, pp. 56-60).

Washington Post writer Gene Weingarten asked a gifted young violinist named Joshua Bell to play a piece of music on his \$3.5 million Stradivarius at a Washington, D.C. subway station at the morning rush hour. It was classical busking at its best, but when Bell played, no crowd gathered. Almost everyone rushed by, utterly oblivious to the fact that they had a free, front-row seat to what would be a pricey concert.

When Weingarten published his article about the experience, letters poured in from readers moved to tears by the story. Some were lovers of classical music, but many saw a larger reality the story represented. “If we can’t take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written,” Weingarten summarized their thoughts, “if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that, then what else are we missing?” What else, indeed?

Rabbi Soloveichik used this story to warn students about the temptation to get so caught up in the pursuit of a career that they might fail to notice things like family, friendship, and faith. He prodded them to listen better. He referenced biblical stories where characters like Moses and Elijah had to learn to listen to God. Listening to God requires careful discernment, he said, and faith teaches us how to listen.

This is the central message of the familiar narrative we have read from Luke, the story of transfiguration. We tend to remember the stage props and pyrotechnics. When Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray with Peter, John, and James, his face changes and his clothes become

dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear, representatives of the law and the prophets, and two people who have met and heard from God on a mountain. A cloud overshadows everyone, and a Voice speaks.

It is a genuine mountaintop experience, in every sense of the term. It has the sights, sounds, and smells of something spectacular! But what does it all mean? The punchline is saved for last; the Voice from the cloud, presumably God, gets it, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” All the sights and sounds are designed to get the disciples’ attention, to tell them Jesus is indeed someone very special, God’s Chosen One, but the message is — listen to him, don’t miss what he says!

We might think they are listening. After all, they are Jesus’ chosen disciples, they are in his inner circle, they have left all to follow him. Surely, they, of all people, are listening to him, right? Well, actually, no, not really. They hear what he says and then argue with him, like when he says he will suffer and die before being raised again. They get some points and miss others entirely, like when he tells them his followers will not seek positions of power but rather make sacrifices for others. They often get sleepy-eyed, as they do here and in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It is comforting to all preachers to learn that even Jesus has people fall asleep on him! But the point is the disciples pick and choose what they want to hear. They aren’t listening to Jesus, really listening, as in hearing the words and heeding them.

When our parents say something to us like, “Do you hear what I am saying?” or “Are you listening to me?” they don’t just mean, “Can you repeat the words I have just said back to me?” That is a start, but what they also mean is, “Will you do what I am asking you to do?”

That is what it means to listen to Jesus. The disciples haven’t mastered it yet, if they ever will, so God calls them to listen.

But this is not just a story about three disciples in the first century. It is a story about us. The calling to listen to Jesus forms the basis of everything else we do, and it is still very much a work-in-progress for us, as it is for Peter, John, and James.

Part of our challenge lies in our lack of biblical literacy. One obvious way we can listen to Jesus is by paying attention to his teachings recorded in scripture, but most people today, even in the church, don't spend much time with scripture. I remember a time the youth in a previous church I served, a wonderful group of young people, were working on an anthem based on John 3:16. When the minister of music paused in the rehearsal and said, "This is obviously a familiar text. Do you know where it comes from in the Bible?" there was a long pause, after which one brave soul finally said, "Psalm 23?"

The good news was that these young people were familiar with the text, and they knew Psalm 23 was beloved. Many people don't know any scripture at all, partly because some years ago in churches like ours, there was a concern that we were teaching chapter and verse through sword drills but missing the big picture of grace and love. It was a valid concern, but we need both — the big picture and what supports it.

I don't how many adults have come to me over the years and said, "I know I don't believe thus and such, but can you tell me why I don't?" If we are going to listen to the teachings of Jesus, we need to read them, not simply accept what someone else tells us about them. The latter is dangerous at a time when so many speak with authority yet no expertise but plenty of agenda. And thinking for ourselves is very Baptist!

But becoming more literate is just the beginning. If we are going to listen to Jesus, we need not just to read scripture but to understand it. There may not always be complete agreement about a text, there may not always be one answer, but as my theology professor, Frank Tupper, used to say, some answers are better than others.

For example, many justify corporal punishment by referencing the biblical verse, "Spare the rod and spoil the child (Proverbs 13:24)." But what is a rod? The psalmist says, "Your rod and your staff — they *comfort* me (that is Psalm 23, verse 4)." The shepherd's rod is not a bludgeoning tool. It is a tool shepherds use to guide sheep, nudge them back into the fold, or keep them from falling off a cliff. It is important not just to know scripture but to understand it, if we are to listen to Jesus.

Of course, God speaks to us other ways which require discernment, and this is where Rabbi Soloveichik's insight comes into play. In the busyness of life, it is easy to miss things that are vital. Michael Quoist said that, if we knew how to listen, we would hear God speaking to us through all of life. A poet once said that if we knew how to listen, the sound of the grass growing would hurt our ears. But we don't.

We don't always hear what God is saying to us through the homeless woman we are helping with shelter on a cold night or the angry child who is lashing out in loneliness or the salesclerk who seems distracted because she is or the majestic sunrise or the soaring eagle. We notice the details of life but miss the Voice speaking as if from a cloud.

So, how do we learn to listen better? It helps to recognize the need and realize it takes effort, a willingness to slow down and tune out distractions. Ali has talked about how little noises in a room, like someone tapping a pen on a table, make it impossible for her to focus on her work. There are things in everyday life that make it difficult for any of us to pay attention on a spiritual level. We have to consciously tune out the chaos to listen for the voice of Christ.

It also helps to train the ears of our soul to listen through devotional practices and shared worship experiences. We don't listen for God's voice only in these times; we train our ears to listen in all of life. The Apostle Paul talks about praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This doesn't mean walking around with our heads bowed and eyes closed, muttering words and bumping into things. It means going about life in a practical way, while on another level of consciousness, being alert to the possibility of God speaking to us.

Of course, even if we train the ears of our soul to hear Jesus, listening to him requires one thing further, that we heed his words. It might involve doing more for the homeless or to prevent homelessness. It might mean seeking to understand why the child is angry. It might mean taking time to listen to the salesclerk or linger over the sunrise or give thanks for the soaring eagle.

Quite often, it requires a willingness to rethink our views in light of new information and make changes in our lives. But listening requires more than hearing; it involves doing what Jesus calls us to do,

even if we are surrounded by people screaming that we ought to do something different. The loudest voices aren't always right. In fact, they usually don't belong to God, which is why it is so important that we learn how to listen.

I remember a time from my adolescence when my mother thought my father had a hearing problem. He seemed to be missing all sorts of important things she was telling him. So, she badgered him repeatedly until finally he was willing to see a doctor. The doctor did all the tests and informed my father that his hearing was excellent. His problem was that he didn't listen. My mother seemed amused by this diagnosis.

We miss out on many things when we don't listen to each other. What else are we missing, especially when God is speaking, and what are we willing to do about it?