

“LISTEN TO HIM!”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, February 15, 2015

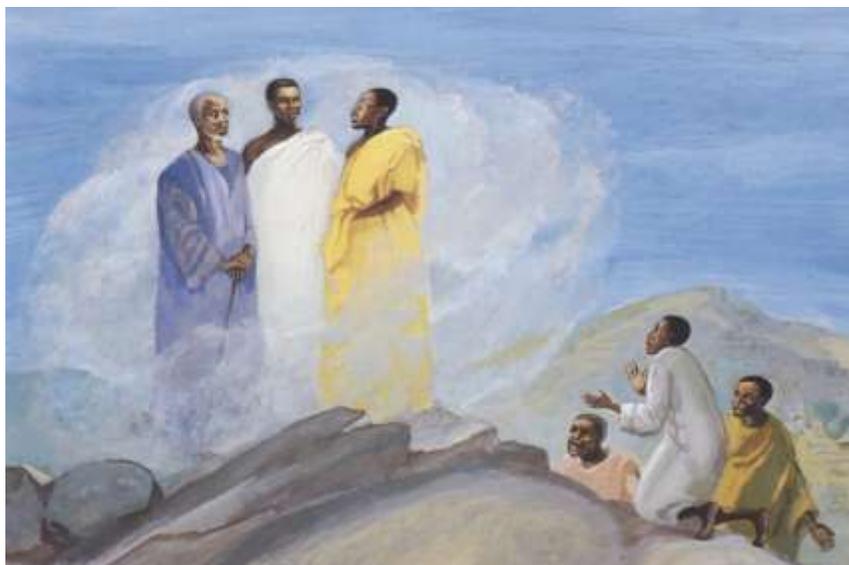
Transfiguration Sunday

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Mark 9:2-9

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ¹



¹ Image: <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48307>.

Henry David Thoreau is a familiar and cherished 19th century American naturalist, philosopher, and poet. His best-known works are *Walden* and *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. Among his other published works is my favorite: *The Maine Woods*. Published in 1864, this book consists of three essays documenting Thoreau's three separate "excursions" in Maine.

The first essay in this book "Ktaadn," includes his musings about his 1846 climb to the summit of Mt. Katahdin in Maine, which at 5,267 feet is the second highest mountain in New England. Thoreau and his companions only had one day when they could try to hike to the summit of Katahdin. On that particular day, the sky was clear and blue everywhere; but the summit was "concealed by mist," as it has often been when I've hiked to the summit of Katahdin.

Leaving his companions behind as they gathered mountain cranberries and blueberries, Thoreau hiked up into the "hostile ranks of clouds," which obscured everything on the mountain. His experience that day, he later wrote, reminded him of the "creations of the old epic and dramatic poets...[The mountain] was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine....His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtle, like the air."

The summits of mountains like Katahdin, Thoreau concluded, "are among the unfinished parts of the globe, whither it is a slight insult to the gods to climb and pry into their secrets, and try their effect on our humanity. Only daring and insolent [persons], perchance, go there."²

Long before Thoreau, of course, ancient spirit-persons such as Moses and Elijah and Jesus climbed to similar "unfinished parts of the globe," where they encountered the Holy One of Israel and pried into God's secrets and tried their effect on our humanity. Moses and Elijah and Jesus were not insolent, but they were certainly daring.

I'm not very daring, and I'm not a mountain climber, but I've hiked to the summit of Katahdin many times since my first trip to Maine in the summer of 1968. I've hiked to the summit of San Geronio Peak in Southern California, at an elevation of 11,500 feet, and I've hiked to a similar elevation on Mt Whitney in California.

Why do I hike up these mountains? For me, it has mostly to do with both the journey and the destination. I enjoy the exercise, the work involved in getting there (or at least some of the exercise!). And I enjoy the view, the reward at the top. Both the journey and the destination help remind me how great is God's creation. And when I in awesome wonder consider all the works that God has made, then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to thee, How great thou art!

Why do we climb mountains? Not only for the sake of the journey, not only for the sake of the destination, but also for the sense that we might on the

² Henry David Thoreau, "Ktaadn," *The Maine Woods* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988; first published in 1864), 85, 86.

mountaintop be closer to God—which is both a fearful and an inspirational experience. (When my companions and I rested on the summit of San Gorgonio Peak, we looked out at a lower peak and watched a cloud sending shafts of lightning onto that peak. As the cumulonimbus cloud began to move in our direction, we scrambled to get down off the summit. None of us was interested in being transfigured by a lightning strike!)

In Mark's account of the mountaintop experience of Jesus' three closest disciples—Peter, James, and John—we don't know what these disciples were expecting or looking for. Even though Peter and the other disciples frequently don't understand what Jesus is about, they are willing to follow him—even up to a mountain summit, which can be a fearful and wonderful place. They follow him up into what Celtic spirituality calls a “thin place”: one of those physical locations or personal experiences where the boundary, the veil between the holy and the ordinary, the sacred and the profane, is thin and permeable. In these “thin places,” the ordinary can become holy, and the holy can become ordinary.³

Mark intends for his story of Jesus to persuade his readers about Jesus' identity, Jesus' authority, and Jesus' destiny. This gospel, this “good news” about Jesus, intends to persuade readers or hearers like ourselves to become disciples of Jesus; or, if we are already disciples, to help us continue along the way of discipleship.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' **identity** is that of God's beloved Son. This was first disclosed at Jesus' baptism, and is now reaffirmed in the voice from the cloud. Jesus' **authority** is a direct mediation of the authority of God: which is why the voice from the cloud commands the disciples to “listen to him!” Jesus' **destiny** will culminate in his death and resurrection: which is why his clothing becomes dazzling white, symbolizing and foreshadowing both martyrdom and vindication. Mark's Gospel, Mark's “good news,” affirms in story what we seek to clarify through theology.

In Mark's mountaintop story, both the vision and the voice are part of the experience of the awesome presence of God, part of an overwhelming sense of the sacred embodied in, and emanating from, Jesus. The vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah implies what is explicit in other New Testament convictions: that Jesus has come not to abolish, but to fulfill, the Law and the Prophets, in fact that Jesus himself is the fulfillment of the Law (represented by Moses) and the Prophets (represented by Elijah). And the voice from the cloud not only repeats what the voice from heaven said at Jesus' baptism, but now speaks a mandate: Listen to him!

If you truly want to follow Jesus, says the voice from the cloud, then listen to him. Hear what he says. Be attentive to what he does. Let his teaching be the guide for your living. Listen to him as you would listen to a rabbi, for he is a teacher. But he is also the Teacher with a capital T: the beloved Son of God, whose authority is greater than any other human authority. Listen to him—not only by hearing his words, but also by acting on them (Matthew 7:24).

³ <http://roydonkin.blogspot.com/>. Accessed online on 02-19-09.

Those of you who are college basketball fans are probably aware of the recent death of former University of North Carolina men's basketball coach Dean Smith. I knew that Dean Smith was a highly successful basketball coach, as well as a mentor to the young men on his teams. What I didn't know about him was the depth of his Christian faith. According to Rev. Robert Seymour, Dean Smith's pastor and friend for half a century, "His legacy goes far beyond basketball. He was an extraordinary human being and a faithful churchman."

Pastor Seymour recently told Jim Wallis of Sojourners Magazine that "right after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed the Congress—at the beginning of Smith's UNC career—he, Smith, and a black theology student walked into the best restaurant in town called The Pines, which had been adamantly segregated, and asked to be served.

"When they saw Dean, they realized they had no choice," Pastor Seymour said. [This incident in] a historically segregated restaurant signaled a significant change in the public accommodations history of Chapel Hill, N.C." Pastor Seymour also recalled that Dean Smith "was willing to take controversial stands on a number of things as a member of our church—being against the death penalty, affirming gays and lesbians, protesting nuclear proliferation."

"Veteran sports writer John Feinstein's favorite story about Dean Smith comes from [an interview](#) he did with the coach.

"When I ... asked him to tell me more about that night, he shot me an angry look. 'Who told you about that?' he asked.

'Reverend Seymour,' I said.

'I wish he hadn't done that.'

'Why? You should be proud of doing something like that.'

He leaned forward in his chair and in a very quiet voice said something I've never forgotten: 'You should never be proud of doing what's right. You should just do what's right.'"

Seymour said of his dear friend, He was willing to speak and act on moral issues "because of his faith." Dean Smith himself, reflecting on the relationship between his career as a college basketball coach and his Christian faith, wrote that "every good vocation can become a Christian vocation."⁴

I'm pretty certain that Dean Smith didn't look to Jesus for guidance on how to teach a basketball player how to improve his jump shot or his passing or his rebounding or his defense. But he did look to Jesus for guidance on how to live his life. He took to heart the voice from the cloud that says to Jesus' disciples, "Listen to him!" And in listening to Jesus, Dean Smith lived out his Christian vocation, and the world is a better place for his having done so.

Thanks and praise be to God! Amen.

⁴ Jim Wallis, <http://sojo.net/blogs/2015/02/12/dean-smith-amazing-grace>.