

February 11, 2024

Listen

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

clear throat...

“If you can hear me clap once. If you can hear me clap twice.”

“May I have your attention please?”

posture of a director preparing the first beat...

“Look at me, I need you to turn on your listening ears!”

Do I have your attention yet?

It was fun thinking of all the ways we try to capture peoples’ attention

It often takes courage and a bit of grit to interrupt what others are doing for the sake of getting them to hear you, see you, engage with you

The advertisements during tonight’s Super Bowl are going to try a whole slew of tactics – talking animals, celebrity endorsements, catchy taglines: who will win the “best commercial of the superbowl” this year?

On NPR’s Morning Edition this week, they were talking about how these commercials, which annually garner as much attention as the game itself, use all the tricks they have up their sleeves “All in trying to link their products to a feeling, an emotion, a story.”¹

Maria Rodas, a marketing professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, says in the clip: “To have this almost undivided attention

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/08/1229964925/a-30-second-spot-to-air-during-the-2024-super-bowl-costs-7-million>

provides an amazing opportunity for marketers to create a narrative, to really be able to connect at a much deeper level with consumers.”

It’s funny, because the biblical scholars say almost the same thing about the Transfiguration – the event our gospel reading describes this morning where Jesus and a few of his disciples hike up a mountain and while at the top Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.”

Do we have your undivided attention yet?

The bright light, the celebrity endorsement and then comes the voice from the cloud (which I imagine to be something like James Earl Jones, or Phil Chin): “This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him!”

Now that God has your undivided attention, God has the opportunity to share a narrative with you, a story that will connect with you and all Jesus’ disciples to our very core: Jesus is God’s Son! Are you listening?

I always think it’s funny, in this story, that after getting our attention and telling us to listen...Jesus doesn’t say anything, but instead leads the disciples back down the mountain

But perhaps, it’s not that Jesus doesn’t say anything, it’s just that my attention span is too short – I expect Jesus to take that moment up upon the top of the mountain to explain it all to his disciples: “Okay, friends – now that my Father has helped get your attention, let me spell it all out for you.”

But Jesus doesn’t do that – at least not up on the mountain top

But, if I let myself stay attentive – if I let myself listen, engage, observe Jesus says a lot:

“Follow me” (Mark 1:17; 2:14). “Pay attention to what you hear” (4:24). “Do not be afraid, only believe” (5:36; 6:50). “You give them something to eat”

(6:37). “Deny [yourself] and take up [your cross] and follow me” (8:34). “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (10:31). “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all” (10:44). “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone” (11:25).

And, those are only the quotes from the gospel of Mark; Matthew, Luke, and John offer even more.²

Add on top of that the incredible messages Jesus’ actions “speak” - Jesus says a lot!

Melinda Quivik, a Liturgical and Homiletical Scholar from St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote in her commentary on this story, that “The church has a responsibility: to listen to God’s Son. That listening does not result in staying aloof where the air is pure and the view is stunning. The church must listen to the voice of God’s Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross. We are not called to have power over others but to rise up as dust that has been formed by the breath of God and give life to others, especially those who are neglected by the powerful.”³

Listening to Jesus is the first step toward living like Jesus

And, listening is active, not passive

As the composer Igor Stravinsky said, “To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.”

To listen is to engage, to listen is to interpret, to listen is to feel, to listen is to learn, to listen is to do.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-mark-92-9-4>

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-mark-92-9-5>

And, to listen to Jesus is not just to sit in comfy chairs in the holy mountain top of our sanctuary – even tho our liturgy and worship are absolutely meant to help get your attention – to break through your daily routines and to remind you “Jesus is God’s Son, the beloved; listen to him!”

Our listening also occurs out there – in our work, in our families, in our communities

The epiphanies out there are sometimes more subtle or sometimes they are like flashing billboards, but I think you know too that those moments of God breaking through and pointing us towards Jesus doesn’t just happen here

But, sometimes we need the costume change, the celebrity endorsement, the voice from the cloud to startle us, or as the scriptures say: to terrify us!

And, we, like the disciples, are filled with the faith and strength we need to stay in the presence of what terrifies us for the sake of the transformation we know it offers and we know we need

Oh how we desire to be in the presence of God’s great illuminating light and to connect with those feelings, those emotions, those stories that make us act, that help us take up our own crosses and follow Jesus, that bring about the great beloved community about which our prophets so eloquently speak

Has God got your attention yet?

Jesus is God’s beloved Son, listen to him!

Listen to him!

Amen.