

Listen to Him

Mark 9:2-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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As this global pandemic grinds into its eleventh month, many are noticing that trust has fallen upon hard times.

The pandemic has steadily eroded our trust in familiar institutions. We don't know who to believe, who to listen to.

Trust in the media is perhaps at an all-time low. News outlets are now often prefixed with terms like "left-wing" or "right-wing" thus demonstrating our awareness of and expectation that the news comes to us heavily filtered and edited for ideological conformity.

We suspect that nobody is telling us the whole truth (about COVID or anything else), that inconvenient data is always being hidden from view, and that, as always, profit is the driving force behind it all.

Add to this the toxic sludge and hysteria of social media and you're left with a communication ecosystem that is a breeding ground for misinformation, disinformation, and partial information.

Trust in politicians wouldn't rank much higher than that of the media. Over the last year, we've seen so many flip flops, so many stuttering and inconsistent policy implementations that we can often hardly be bothered to pay attention when a politician opens his or her mouth these days.

To be fair, leadership in a pandemic is not easy. We should cut our politicians some slack as they face the impossible task of balancing public health (which is affected by much more than COVID-19) and the economy. It's unreasonable to expect that our elected officials won't get a few things wrong here and there.

But public trust was hardly helped by politicians (of all stripes) jetting off to warmer climates over the Christmas holidays and generally acting as if the rules apply to us but not really to them.

We don't even trust health professionals and scientists. At least not as much as we probably could or should.

Didn't they say we shouldn't wear masks last April? What about this YouTube video I found of a virologist saying it's all a hoax anyway? Yeah, well what about this video I found which says we're on the precipice of a health catastrophe (you can always find a video where someone smart is saying what you want to hear, right?).

And what do all these COVID stats even mean? What counts as a "COVID death" and what doesn't? Who decides? Who knows?

Now, because of these new variants, we have health professionals solemnly telling us that wearing masks and distancing will be necessary even *after* we get a vaccine, which, I suspect, won't do much for vaccination rates and just adds to the general sense of fatigue and mistrust.

And of course, we increasingly don't really trust each other. We are becoming ever more suspicious and resentful of our neighbours.

Why isn't that person wearing a mask? Are they trying to infect us all? How could they be so ignorant?! Why are all those stupid sheep wearing masks? Can't they think for themselves?

Why does that person have cars in their driveway? Haven't they heard of the new restrictions on social gatherings? I should probably report them! Or post a scathing rebuke on Facebook!

We do our best to keep two meters apart physically (sometimes) but we're often far further apart than that in our hearts and minds.

Does this world I've described sound familiar to you? I suspect so.

The erosion of trust that this pandemic has brought to the surface is nothing new. As a culture, we have been trending in this direction for some time.

Some say it began with postmodernity in the mid-twentieth century and its critique of all grand narratives, its focus on the subjectivity of all human knowing and believing.

Some say it began with the Enlightenment and the elevation of reason over other traditional forms of knowledge. Some would even go as far back as the Protestant Reformation which cracked the door open to interpreting for ourselves and not just believing what some priest or pope said about anything.

So, on one level this is nothing new. But I think the pandemic has certainly made it front and center!

It has brought a basic question to the surface. Who do we trust? Or perhaps a different way of putting it would be, “Who do we listen to?”

The Sunday School answer is, of course, Jesus.

It’s also the answer that comes from our passage from Mark on this Transfiguration Sunday.

Jesus has dragged Peter, James and John up the mountain with him where they are joined, miraculously, by Elijah and Moses—these heroes of the Jewish faith.

Elijah and Moses represent the Prophets and the Law, the authoritative history and law of Israel’s tradition. This is who the people of Israel were to listen to.

Peter is so overwhelmed that he just blurts out the first thing that occurs to him—“let’s build shelters.” Three of them, one for each source of authority. I’m sure he imagined that this was quite a concession on his part, making Jesus equal with Moses and Elijah!

(I love that verse 6 says that Peter had no idea what to say. It gives me hope for all the times I have no idea what to say!)

And then the divine voice from the cloud: “This is my Son, the beloved, *listen to him.*”

Listen. To him.

No sooner are these words spoken than the disciples look around, maybe to see what Elijah and Moses think of proceedings thus far. But they are nowhere to be seen.

The passage ends with the disciples seeing only Jesus.

The symbolism is unmistakable. Jesus is not just another prophet, like Elijah. He is not just another lawgiver, like Moses. He is the beloved Son of God whose voice now stands alone.

Listen to him.

Don't ignore Elijah. Don't cut Moses out of your bibles. They have played important roles in God's story.

But Jesus is where the story was always going. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus alone can say, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..."

Jesus stands alone on the mountaintop. Listen to him.

Ok, but how? Naomi asked me this question rather directly over breakfast earlier this week after I had regaled her with some of my fine sermon research.

How do we listen to Jesus? It *sounds* good, and it would have been great to have been up on that mountain like Peter, James and John. But we're not. We can't listen to him in the way that they could. So how does Jesus speak here and now?

Well, he speaks through the Scriptures, obviously. We can listen to him by listening to his teachings. Anabaptists have historically prioritized Matthew 5-7, the Sermon the Mount, which contains many of Jesus' most distinctive teachings on peacemaking, nonviolence, and forgiveness, among other things.

We can listen to his voice in the context of community, his body, the church. We can create space in prayer to sit in silence and see what or who the Spirit brings to mind. These are all ways that Christians have sought to listen to the voice of Jesus throughout history.

I also think it has a lot to do with how and to what we pay attention.

A decade or so ago, the psychologist Daniel Simons conducted what has become a rather famous experiment. It came to be known as the “Monkey Business Illusion” (I’ve included the YouTube link in the transcript of this sermon which can be accessed on our church website).¹

In it, he asks viewers watch a video where six people are in a room, half dressed in white t-shirts, half dressed in black. Each team has a basketball. Viewers are instructed to count how many times the players wearing white pass the ball.

The players begin to move around the room, passing the ball to the players on their team. They do this for around thirty seconds. There’s a lot of motion and you have to pay attention to one ball and not the other.

At the end of those thirty seconds, a screen comes up that says, “the correct answer is sixteen passes.”

The next screen says, “Did you spot the gorilla?”

In the middle of the black and white teams moving around and passing the ball, a man in a gorilla suit had walked right across the stage the experiment was being conducted on.

Nearly half of all participants who hadn’t heard about this video beforehand completely missed the black gorilla. I was one of them.

I can’t remember when I first saw the video, but I do remember that I was so focused on counting the passes as the players weaved in and out between each other that I didn’t even see the gorilla! Once I found out what was really going on, I backed up the video and it was plain as day.

I also didn’t notice that one of the players on the black team just walked off the stage and that the curtain behind the stage changed colour during the course of the game.

I was too busy looking for something else.

The truth made plain by the experiment is that it matters what we’re paying attention to!

Andrew Root is a theologian who wrote a book called *The Pastor in a Secular Age*. Commenting

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGQmdoK_ZfY

on the gorilla experiment, he says this:

Attention is a powerful thing. Our perceptions of reality are contingent on our attention. What we put our focus on is what we see... We can and do miss hugely obvious structures within reality when our attention is on something else.²

And so, to return to our theme, part of what it means to listen to Jesus is to attend to Jesus in our everyday lives. To expect that he will show up in ordinary situations if we are paying attention. To look for him in the fabric of everyday life. To believe that he still speaks to those who listen.

The shadow side of this truth is that if we don't expect to see Jesus, we won't. I didn't expect to see a gorilla in a video where I was counting basketball passes. And so, I didn't.

If we move through our days assuming that Jesus is not present, that he's done speaking, that he said what he had to say a couple thousand years ago, then we probably won't hear his voice today.

What we attend to and how we attend to it, matters.

I do not always attend to Jesus perfectly (sorry to disappoint you!). I miss what should be obvious and I give my attention to things that are not worthy of it.

But I can say with confidence that the results of this experiment are borne out in my own life and faith. When I expect to see Jesus, I do. When I attend to other people and situations anticipating that Jesus will have something to say, he almost invariably does.

For me, the most obvious example of this is whenever I am in the context of human pain and suffering. I expect Jesus to be speaking here because he is the one who said, "blessed are the poor in spirit... those who mourn... those who suffer for righteousness' sake..."

I listen differently, I pay more careful attention in places like the jail or the soup kitchen or the hospital or in some conversation where someone's heart is breaking or when someone is being mistreated than I do when I'm in a committee meeting (I probably *shouldn't*, but I do).

² Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 270.

I see Jesus and hear from him in the context of suffering because Jesus suffered to bring about new life and I expect to find him doing the same today.

I attend differently when I see someone taking the risk of extending mercy and forgiveness. I pay more careful attention when I see grace at work, whether in people's lives or it's being portrayed in a film or a novel.

I see Jesus and hear from him when I bear witness to forgiveness, mercy, and grace because in Jesus I see that these are God's basic dispositions toward his children, and I expect to find him extending these things today.

These are just two examples. Perhaps you would have your own examples of places in your life where you attend and listen for Jesus differently. I hope so.

The point isn't that there are some places in life where Jesus speaks and some where he doesn't and that it's our job to find those places.

I think Jesus is always speaking. The point is to attend to how we are attending, and to seek to become better listeners.

I began by talking about the crisis of trust in our time and about how we very often don't know who to listen to or how.

Ultimately, we listen to who we trust. And I think that on the deepest level, trust is inherently relational and inherently personal.

I trust Naomi (Happy Valentine's Day, dear!) because I have known and loved her for nearly three decades. I know her character. I don't require her to earn my trust afresh each morning. It is a given in my life.

Similarly, I trust the God revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ because I have walked with him for nearly four decades. I have seen his call to pursue the good, the true, and the beautiful validated in my experience of the world. I have experienced the freedom of unmerited forgiveness and mercy in my own life.

My imagination has been expanded, my vision liberated, and my hope enlarged. I have tasted grace and been bound more closely to its source.

I have come to believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. I believe that his voice is the voice of God. And so, I trust him. And I try to listen for him. And *to* him.

I want to close with the words of Australian theologian Benjamin Myers who preached a marvelous sermon on why he believes in God back in 2011 in a little church in the Blue Mountains outside Sydney.

His words are about as beautiful a portrayal of the one who stands alone on the mountaintop that I have encountered:

Jesus is the one who showed us the face of God—Jesus shows us the truth of God, Jesus shows us the love of God. Jesus is God’s smile beaming at us out of the depths of eternity. Jesus is God’s love wrapping around us, seizing us and not letting us go. Jesus is God’s grace, reaching into the darkest and most shameful dimensions of our experience. Jesus is God’s healing, binding up the wounded. Jesus is God’s goodness, in a world full of chaos and disaster and catastrophe. Jesus is God’s great strength for the weak. Jesus is water for the thirsty, and when you drink that water you will never thirst again. Jesus is bread for all those who are starved and hungry, famished for something good and something true. Jesus shows us God. He is not God’s explanation, he is not God’s argument, he is not God’s debate. He is God’s simple, great, loving act, showing us, Here I am, here you are. In Jesus, God shows us God. That I believe, is the whole secret of the Christian faith.³

Me, too.

Listen to him. He still speaks.

Amen.



³ <https://ryandueck.com/2011/08/31/we-are-always-talking-about-jesus/>