

Matthew 17:1-9

If you've ever seen an old Western or "shoot-em-up" movie, you've watched the scene where a man with something to say comes into a place where people are gathered. Everyone is talking; it's loud; there's lots of commotion. The man with the message suddenly fires his gun into the air. Instantly there is a hush that falls over the crowd of people. All eyes turn toward the man holding the smoking gun, and he says, "Now that I have your attention...I have something to say."

Last Sunday night God fired His gun into the air, and the next morning as we saw, in clear daylight, the smoking gun in His hand --all the damage left behind by the horrific windstorm--the voice of God was ringing out over the hushed silence: Now that I have your attention...I have something to say.

If you doubt my words, then look again at our text. Peter, James, and John were up on a high mountain with Jesus. And as usual, Peter couldn't keep his mouth shut. But God fired His gun. It was a blast that shut up the mouths of the disciples and dropped them to their knees in fear. Jesus shined like the sun and His clothing was as white as light. A bright cloud came over them and the voice of the Father came forth, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to Him." And when the disciples looked up, the cloud of the smoking gun had gone away and Jesus, just plain Jesus, was standing before them. Was all of this not God firing off His gun and saying: Now that I have your attention...My Son has something to say..."Listen to Him."

But that is, by far, our biggest problem in life. We don't listen to Jesus very well. Oh we're good at talking and doing. We talk at get-togethers, we do church meetings, planning meetings. We can talk about this and that with friends and neighbors...what our problems are, what we should do to fix our problems. We're good at business meetings, but we're not so good at listening to Jesus. We can focus on numbers and figures; we just can't focus too well on the figure hanging from the cross. We're good at fund-raisers, but we're not so good at sitting in church to listen. We're good at putting in our time to help others out; we're not so good at taking the time to listen to God's Word in Bible Study.

But the voice of the Father on that high mountain did not say: Do things for My Son...have church dinners and things to make money for His cause. The voice said, "Listen to Him." The voice did not say: Think about My Son now and then as you live your life. The voice said, "Listen to Him." The voice did not say: Keep My Son in your back pocket for those times in life when you may need Him. The voice said, "Listen to Him."

But we're not so good at listening. We're problem solvers. We're hard workers. We hunt, we fish, we live life to the fullest. We like to give our advice to others. But sitting down and opening our ears to listen to Jesus...it's not our greatest strength. But that's the one thing, above all other things, that God wants us to do. Martha was working her tail off for Jesus in the kitchen, but Jesus did not commend her; He commended Mary who sat down at His feet to listen. On the cross the one thief could not shut his mouth. He reviled Jesus over and over with words of mocking. But the other thief listened to what Jesus had to say, and because he listened, he is with Jesus today in Paradise.

Did God allow the tornado to come last Sunday because we don't listen so well? Because our congregation is out of balance, putting church work ahead of simple, humble listening to Jesus? Did God allow the storm to come in order to get our attention because our attention has been on all the wrong things? If so, then it's because God is full of mercy toward us. It has been said, and rightly so, that the worst punishment is for God to simply leave us alone. When God grabs our attention by allowing trouble and panic to enter our life, it is an act of His mercy. He wants our complete attention so that His words have a clear pathway into our ears.

We are not going to solve our church's money problems with fish fries and dinners and fund-raisers, but by more and more of our members coming to sit and listen to the words of Jesus. We're not going to grow our church by beautifying our building and grounds, but by our members growing in God's Word, and through such inward growth God may, if He chooses, give us growth in numbers. Not one of us is going to have a life free of troubles until we come to our senses and see that through our troubles God is drawing us back to Him, back to the hearing of His words.

"Listen to Him," God told Peter, James, and John. And they did. And here are the very first words they heard from Jesus' mouth..."Rise and have no fear." He did not yell at them for being weaklings up there on the mountain. He did not curse them for their sinful behavior. He comforted them. And friend, that is why God wants you today to listen to Jesus, because when the storms of life land their punches on you, Jesus' words are the comfort you need.

If you are here to listen, then you are blessed, because Jesus is here to give. After leaving the high mountain, Jesus made His way toward the cross. It's where we are headed this Ash Wednesday. He made His way there to suffer and die for people who do not listen very well, for people who have trouble focusing on Him, for people like you and me. He left one mountain to travel to another mountain. On the high mountain His glory shined like the sun. On Mt. Calvary it became pitch black as He hung in the clutches of death. On the high mountain the Father's voice cried, "Listen to Him!" On Mt. Calvary Jesus spoke seven times, and the first words out of His mouth were, "Father, forgive them." You and I may not listen too well, but His Father was listening. He heard His Son and He did what He asked. He forgave them. Who? You. The Roman Soldiers, the Chief Priests, the two thieves, the Jews, and you.

Because the Heavenly Father listened to His Son, you are forgiven for not listening so well. Because the Father listened, He forgives you for having your priorities all mixed up. And because the Father listened to His Son, He allows things like windstorms and troubles to come into your life so that, getting your attention, He looks you in the eye and says softly: I am not angry with you, I love you; My Son died for you; I forgive you and I give you life now and forever in My Son Jesus.

These words are meant for you, but if any are not listening, what Jesus did for every sinner does them no good. Too many people do not listen at all to Jesus. There are those who say: I'll look at the cross every now and then...maybe Christmas and Easter. And yet the Bible is clear...not the cross, but the word of the cross is the power of God that saves. "Faith comes by hearing," by listening to the word of Christ.

That word of Christ is here today for you. God is placing it into your ears, and at His altar into your mouth. There is no other word more important than this word. It's not a word, a message you can hear once and that's all there is to it. This word of Christ is like rain for the crops, like food for the body, like medicine for the diabetic. When the voice of the Father cried, "Listen to Him," His words mean listen, and keep listening. Don't ever stop listening to Jesus. Don't ever put your Bible on the shelf. Don't ever put being busy in the way of Bible Study and worship. God wants your ears open always where Jesus Christ is taught and preached, because He always desires and promises to pour out His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation into your open ears and mouth. Amen.