

The Rev. Cornel Barnett, D.Min.
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 17:1-9
"Listening for Lent"

Even kings and queens have physical challenges. In the Oscar-winning movie, "The King's Speech," the king had a speech impediment. He stuttered as the result of mistreatment when he was a child.

Like most good movies, the film brilliantly highlights the human condition. In this case: human vulnerabilities.

We have come to a time when the liturgical year does a major switch. This happens every year on Transfiguration Sunday which always precedes Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent.

Scholars say that when Jesus stands at the top of the mountain in our gospel reading today he is at the theological high point of his ministry. He has ministered in the plains of Galilee and now goes up the mountain, hears God's voice and goes back down and sets his face towards Jerusalem where he will die and rise from the dead. Lent and Holy Week takes us on the latter journey – six and half weeks – of reflection and deepening.

Transfiguration Sunday provides food for the journey. The ingredients this year are God's words to the disciples on the mountain: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Listening will be our theme for Lent. We have an insert on listening by Morton Kelsey taken from his book, *Caring: How Can We Love One Another?* He writes that it's impossible for us to love other people unless we listen to them. Our listening does not judge or evaluate and it's open and objective. He continues: There are few things more important for effective human relationships than continued, attentive listening.

So God tells the disciples and us to listen to Jesus. In this way we demonstrate our love for Jesus. So how do we listen to Jesus?

We listen by simply reading the gospels and we pay attention to his words and actions. I have the entire New Testament on CD and I have been listening to Jesus in my car. A Lenten commitment might be simply reading the Gospels.

We listen to Jesus by hearing what he said back then and trying to make sense of his words and actions today. We hear denarii and think dollar. We hear taxes, Caesar and God and think taxes, government and God. We hear Galilee and think Wisconsin. We read about Jesus healing the sick and we think spirit and medical science, and so on. We hear timeless truths like love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love

your neighbor as yourself, and love your enemies, and we do our best to apply these truths in our day and age. The sky is the limit.

We listen to Jesus by affirming his humanity. The Brief Statement of Faith in our *Book of Confessions* states that Jesus was: “fully human, fully God.” How this is so is the subject of many books. A full human being experiences what we experience so everything human has something to say about Jesus.

So with the biblical Jesus in mind, the transfigured Jesus, we look to the human predicament and human experiences today – our own and others – and listen to Jesus.

In the opening, I mentioned the king’s stutter in the movie “The King’s Speech.” The movie highlights the human condition and might plug into our vulnerabilities. It reminded me that I stuttered when I first spoke but I overcame it fairly quickly. Was my stuttering a result of the separation of my parents when I was a baby? Was it the result of their conflict which I felt as a baby? The movie addresses very well the struggle to overcome this adversity and the creative and unconventional approach of the speech therapist. I vaguely remember being frustrated with my stuttering and visiting medical personal and fortunately overcame it fairly soon with the help of a loving and hard-working mother.

We hear Jesus in the vulnerable and in the will to overcome one’s vulnerabilities. We hear Jesus in the struggle for wholeness. We hear him feeding and healing and we are called to be creative, engaging, loving and healing agents as Christians in the world.

Many people go to the movies for entertainment. That’s okay. I go to be entertained and to hear what God is saying to me in the movie. When God says “listen to him” I listen at every opportunity and the Oscar movies provide me many ways to listen to Jesus.

Since Jesus is divine and human every human situation contains the divine.

The movie “The Fighter” is about a boxer going for the gold and how he gets there. This is achieved through his own will and work, scattered coaching and his primary relationships with his mother, brother and girlfriend. The secondary story or sub-plot is the brother’s drug addiction and consequences. It’s easier to see Jesus in the gym than in the crack house but even in the crack house the divine is present in that every person there is someone’s son, daughter, sister, brother, etc. We live in a world where drugs are readily available and people get hooked for reasons that are beyond them and therefore we can be relatively aware of what is going on and empathize and respond in ways God calls us to respond. What is our knowledge and where are the supports? What would Jesus have us do?

In “Black Swan” we begin with the protagonist who loses her mental capacities through a variety of means: Parental pressure, competition, overwork and the strain and pain of staying on the top of her game. Perhaps there is more to what ails her. The challenge for a Christian listening to Jesus is facing mental illness. How can we prevent it and how can we best support ourselves and others experiencing strains that push us towards the edge? What is the role of prayer in this context? How do we balance medicine and faith?

“Black Swan” and “The Fighter” elicit thoughts about competition. In some ways competition is good and in other ways it can be detrimental to our health. What’s the relationship between competition and cooperation?

The movie “Inception” has a lot of violence which I don’t like and I’m not sure Jesus would like but we look beyond the violence to a story about dreams, multiple dreams and dreams affecting dreams. It’s complicated. Morton Kelsey wrote another book called, *Dreams: A Way of Listening to God*. If nothing else, “Inception” encourages us to take our dreams seriously. Jesus appears in dreams and speaks to us. We listen to our dreams best when we meditate on them the next day and continue to ask Jesus what he is saying to us in our dream or dreams. We can process our dreams with a friend or therapist. Meditating on our dreams can be another Lenten commitment.

I can speak of other Oscar-nominated movies but there is no time. It’s important to add though that there are a number of movies, especially the short films that deal with ecological, social, political, economic and military matters where Jesus speaks to us through a megaphone.

All of life is a way of listening to Jesus and Lent is no exception. In our Wednesday evening spiritual practices we will listen to Jesus in our prayers and meditation. We will hear him afresh in worship and we will hear him in our listening to each other and to everything in the world around us. We will hear him if we use the Lenten Devotional each week of Lent.

Today is Holy Communion. We hear Jesus in words about the bread and cup. We hear words about the ongoing goodness of a God who journeys with us; about the power of love to remove any barrier within and among us; and we hear words about the mystery of call given to each one here, to make bread and life and beauty available to everyone.

Lives are changed for the good in this world of ours, our lives are changed, and we can change the world when we listen to Jesus which is what I mean by the sermon title “Listening for Lent.” Amen.