

The Silence of Awe
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2 Kings 2:1-12

¹Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ²Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. ³The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

⁴Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. ⁵The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

⁶Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. ⁷Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

⁹When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." ¹⁰He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." ¹¹As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹²Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

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.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

We are taught to speak.

See something, say something.

We hover over our children, repeating words to them, and encourage them to repeat them back to us.

“Speak up!” we tell them.

And so the culture tells us.

Speak out!

Speak your mind.

Speak your piece.

Say something.

John Cusack as Lloyd Dobler in the movie “Say Anything.”

We talk about the importance of finding our voice.

And it’s good. Our voices are important.

But there are times, are there not, when we should remain silent?

When we should allow ourselves to say nothing and simply be present in that moment.

Moments of learning. Moments of witness. Moments of wonder, like the moments we hear about in our scriptures for today.

In the 21st century, silence does not come naturally.

It will be no surprise to you that I often hear feedback about my worship leadership that tells me, well, that I am loud. I know how to project my voice.

True or not, I usually tell people that I developed my voice at my family dinner table growing up. She who shouts the loudest wins the argument.

Silence doesn’t come naturally to me, either.

Neither did it to Tom Ryan.

A newspaper writer and editor who was an extremely vocal member of his community, as it says on the back of the book he wrote about the experience, “After a close friend died of cancer, middle-aged, overweight, acrophobic newspaperman Tom Ryan decided to pay tribute to her in a most unorthodox manner. Ryan and his friend, miniature schnauzer Atticus M. Finch, would attempt to

climb all forty-eight of New Hampshire's four-thousand-foot peaks twice in one winter while raising money for charity.”

All of this was true. Tom Ryan was not the one you might expect to be doing serious winter, snow-hiking to four-thousand peaks. But Atticus was not your normal dog. Tom and gotten Atticus as a puppy, and from the first moment they had been inseparable. And so they were inseparable on the trail.

The book is called “Following Atticus,” and that’s what Tom Ryan did. He followed the lead of his dog up the mountain, and on top of the mountain.

(in case you can’t tell, I really enjoyed the book and recommend it to anyone who would like a nice read.)

“When it came to climbing, Atticus was all business. He always knew that after we took a break on the way up a mountain and I stood to put my pack on, we continued on up. As far as he was concerned, we kept going up until there was no more up. It was uncanny how he seemed to know this. When we got to the top, we shared a ritual. I’d pick him up as I had when he was a puppy, and he’d sit in the crook of my arm, and together we looked out at the views. Whenever we did this, the only thing I heard from him was a contented sigh. At that moment I always said, “Thank you,” but I was never sure who I was thanking. It was something that slipped out when I picked him up on top of Mount Hale and continued to slip out with each summit reached. After we took in the view, we shared something to eat and drink, and he’d then go off a little ways and sit and gaze. He didn’t lie down. He sat, and the only thing he moved was his head. He was meditating. I once timed him, and he stopped only when I interrupted him, after forty-five minutes.”

It is, I think, the most appropriate response when faced with a wonder that goes beyond what can be reasonably articulated or explained. What Atticus taught Tom Ryan to experience. Silence. Awe.

Not a gift Peter had on top of the mountain.

D. Mark Davis writes:

‘This mountaintop experience—a curious side stop on the journey of blood, sweat, and tears—is a moment of sheer bedazzlement for Peter, James, and John. What they see is not what they get. What they see, they cannot begin to fathom. It all looks familiar—Jesus, Moses, Elijah, clothes—but it’s all wrong. Moses is dead; Elijah left in a burning chariot ages before; Jesus is ... well, whatever “transfigured” means; and those clothes—Mark struggles for a way to say that they are looking like what clothes don’t look like. It’s all familiar but unfamiliar at once. Beyond words, one might say, but ... yet Peter blurts. He blurts because giving voice to our wonder is what we do. That’s why we undertake the presumption of writing memoirs, testifying in court, opining on political matters, or doing theology. We assume that what we experience can be captured in words, communicated to others, and comprehended fully enough. But, then, there are those mountaintop experiences that defy that presumption. We see things that are not possible. We feel things that don’t fit any existing

¹ <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-bedazzlement-mark-92-9/>

category. We strive for analogies and add, “But much, much more.” We cannot capture, communicate, or comprehend it in words, but words are all we have. Blurting is how we pretend to capture, communicate, and comprehend. So we blurt—just when it would be wise to wonder. And listen.

We can’t be too hard on Peter. He was overwhelmed. He placed his words into the unknown because the unknown was scary. And he drew on what he knew, the Jewish tradition of sukkhot, building temporary booths or protective dwellings, which Moses and Elijah would need if they were really on that mountain top.

Peter was overwhelmed. The world wasn’t making sense.

And maybe we can relate to that. Because we don’t know what the future will bring. The news cycles seems pre-programmed these days to keep us at high alert.

And when it rains like it is, has been raining, how can you help but make comparisons?

We don’t know what the future will bring.

Will our children be okay?

Will the surgery work?

Will the job work out?

Will the creek continue to rise?

Will the marriage survive?

Will the recovery keep the addiction at bay?

Will the paycheck stretch?

There are so many unknowns facing us, we can hardly be blamed for allowing anxiety to fill any empty space we can find?

If only that worked.

The only thing that does work, of course, is learning to be present in that moment. On that mountain. With Jesus, and let him be our okay.

Because the Transfiguration brings another message to us today.

Karoline Lewis writes:²

The Transfiguration reveals the power of our present because of God's presence in Jesus, but it also points to the potential of our future. That's what Peter could not see. [We cannot see]. We constantly and continually try to contain the present. And why? Because we believe, falsely, that the present is that which can be controlled and therefore, our futures as well.... This leads to another overlooked truth of the Transfiguration -- that what we've seen so far is nothing compared to what's in store. The Transfiguration is no mere demonstration of God's glory, but that which insists God's glory will persist in the midst of and in spite of all that would point to the contrary.

I do not claim to understand what's going on in your life. But I have yet to meet someone who doesn't have something going on in their life, whether it is a mountaintop or a valley moment or somewhere on the hard hike between the two.

And for this church, which is beginning to ask questions of mission and understanding and service.

And on this Sunday. This Sunday when we stand at the cusp of Ash Wednesday and Lent, still early in Jesus' story, remembering his journey into the wilderness, there may be no more important message for us to here. That we are still early in God's story for us, too. There is more to come. And that if we listen to Jesus, we will remember and know, we are never alone. God will walk with us. God will lead us.

Whether you are a blurter like Peter or have the wisdom of a miniature schnauzer named Atticus.

Never, ever, alone.

Always, forever loved.

Amen.

Amen.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3561