

## **“Pay Attention”**

### **A Sermon Preached on the Feast of the Transfiguration**

**Sunday, August 6, 2017**

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**Exodus 34:29-35, Psalm 99, 2 Peter 1:13-21, Luke 9:28-36**

The poet Mary Oliver once wrote: “To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.” In her poem “Sometimes,” she elaborated on this thought. “Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”

The scripture readings appointed for this Sunday are about paying attention, being astonished, and telling others about it. The people of the Exodus paid attention to Moses and were astonished by his sunburn as he descended from his visit with God on Mt. Sinai. Moses paid attention to God, was astonished by what he heard and felt compelled to talk about it with his companions in the wilderness.

The author of this morning’s epistle, a pastoral letter to the early church written in the name of Peter, claiming the authority of an eyewitness to Christ’s transformation on the mountain, admonishes the church to “be attentive” to the word of scripture and the voice of God’s messengers. In doing so, the writer compares the prophetic message of God to a lamp shining in the dark – like the one house in a neighborhood with a generator during a power outage.

This morning’s powerful gospel story is also about paying attention and being astonished. Jesus, standing with Moses and Elijah, was transfigured before the eyes of his closest disciples, including our beloved James the Fisherman. And, after Simon Peter missed the mark by suggesting that they build dwellings and create a permanent structure on the mountaintop, God intervened. Speaking from the clouds, the divine voice said, “Listen.” Pay attention to what you see and hear. Jesus and his companions were astonished by what they saw and heard. However, they were too frightened to tell anybody about it – at least for the time being, and according to the accounts in Matthew and Mark, Jesus didn’t think it was the opportune time for sharing this news.

So this morning, I ask you: Are you paying attention these days? Are you really paying attention to your life, your world, and your God? As you live your life, and engage with the world around you, are you watching for and listening to the wisdom of God? Are you astonished by what you see and hear, and are you willing to tell about it? Reflecting on this morning’s scripture, I invite you to imagine what the world would be like and what our own lives would be like if we, following Jesus, really paid attention to the Holy One in our midst, if we were astonished by what we heard, and if we were willing to tell about it.

It is difficult to be attentive. Attention requires discipline, focus and purpose. According to the Centers for Disease Control, some 11% of children in this country and 4% of adults have Attention

Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. With all of the stimuli – television, radio, the internet – in our environment, health experts expect this statistic to continue to climb.

It's hard to listen attentively, to truly hear what others, even God, are trying to say to us. People think four or five times faster than they can speak. Distractions often slip into our minds when we're trying to listen. That's why we have a tendency to interrupt, finish the other person's sentence, talk over the other person, jump to conclusion, write the end of the script, and offer advice too soon. No wonder so many people get frustrated and say, "You never listen to me!"

One of the experiences I'm having these days is paying attention – that is, giving awareness – to the fact that my mind, especially my reaction time, my speech, and my ability to "multi-task" – is slowing down. At first, I was frustrated and frightened by this new reality. Then one day, as I apologized to someone for my halting and slower speech, he laughed and said, "Don't take this the wrong way, but I really like the new you because now I can keep up with you."

As I live into my "new normal" with less short-term recall, I'm also finding that I have to pay close attention in order not to get lost or confused. And, as I lose my ability to multi-task, I now have to concentrate on that which is in front of me, that which is present.

Through yoga, meditation, and other mindfulness practices, I'm discovering that the degeneration of the frontotemporal lobes of my brain is actually becoming a gift in my ability to listen and watch with much more careful attention, to speak with greater simplicity, and to act with more compassion. Moreover, I find myself being astonished by things I used to not even notice. I am learning, on a daily basis, that there are gifts to be discovered in every circumstance, if we pay attention. And I'm willing to talk about it so that others might learn from my experience.

Our collective inability to listen attentively affects many aspects of our life, perhaps most especially the public realm and the political arena. Just think about the deadlock in Washington. Are our elected leaders (on both sides of the aisle) really paying careful attention to the state of our nation and the world? How would they (and we) respond to issues like health care, immigration, environmental protection if everyone could hear clearly God's voice in the debate?

With all of the visual distractions in our world, it's also hard to see that which is important and perhaps even transformative. We frequently miss the visual cues in front of our eyes because we're not looking. We're often too busy or distracted to stop, look and pay attention to and be astonished by the world God created and we inhabit, much less the presence of the Divine in our midst.

As Annie Dillard so acutely observed in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, we are like "cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute...having coffee and doughnuts on Deck C, [presuming that] someone is minding the ship, correcting the course, avoiding icebergs and shoals, fueling the engines, watching the radar screen, noting the weather reports radioed in from shore." (p. 40) But are we looking around, paying attention to the reef, the shoreline, the ship in our course? As Dillard asks, are we even attentive to "the

sleeping god [who] may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god [who] may draw us out to where we can never return.” (p. 40-41)

That’s the story of the Transfiguration. Those disciples went up on that mountaintop with Jesus, and he was transfigured before their very eyes and they were drawn out to a place from which they could never return.

When it comes to the spiritual practice of paying attention and being astonished, mountains have a lot to teach. They are sacred places, and people have always sought spiritual renewal and guidance in and among them. Mountains are cosmological metaphors – symbolic dwelling places – of the divine, therefore favored locations for shrines, temples and altars.

Rising high above the landscape, mountains invite and invoke our attentiveness. They are places of vision, where one can envision the intersection between heaven and earth. No wonder, the biblical writers chose mountains as the place for Moses to receive the Ten Commandments, Elijah to hear the still small voice, and Jesus to be transfigured before the eyes of his closest disciples.

As Jon Kabat-Zinn explains in his book *Wherever you Go, There you are*, “There are outer mountains and inner mountains, and their very presence beckons to us, calls us to ascend.” He suggests that the mountain climb is a powerful metaphor for the spiritual journey, and that life itself is the mountain, “serving us up perfect opportunities to do the inner work of growing in [spiritual] strength and wisdom.” First, we learn what it’s like at the base. Then we ascend, encountering the slopes, and perhaps, the top. But, as Peter learned after he offered to build those three dwelling places for his heroes, one can’t remain on the top of the mountain; one has to come down from the mountain. According to the wisdom of the ages, the journey up is not complete without the descent – the bringing into new perspective the world below.

In our Sunday morning patio conversations this summer, we’ve been talking about spiritual practice. One of the cornerstones of all spiritual disciplines is to listen and look carefully at your life and the life of the world. Spiritual practice invites us to pay attention and be astonished: pay attention in a new way, in a more profound way; and be astonished by the presence of the divine in what we see and hear. That’s why pilgrimage – especially when it involves mountains is so central to spiritual practice. It provides the ideal circumstances for this practice; after all, if you don’t pay attention while climbing up and down mountains, you can get really hurt, and if you’re not astonished along the way, then you’re not paying attention.

But you don’t have to physically go to the mountains to learn this spiritual practice. You can bring the mountains into your daily life. In fact, Jon Kabat-Zinn suggests that we can practice our attentiveness simply by climbing the stairs more slowly and more intentionally, taking one careful step without hurry – being attentive to your surroundings, your movement, and your thoughts.

In mindfulness practice, there is an exercise called mountain meditation. It invites us to picture in our mind’s eye the most beautiful, magnificent mountain we can recall or imagine. It encourages us to focus

carefully on this mountain, noting its massive, unmoving nature – the universal qualities that make it a mountain. Then, when we feel ready, the practice invites us to imagine our body sitting still as a mountain – becoming one with the mountain so that we might practice the unwavering sturdiness of the mountain. By becoming a mountain in our meditation, contemplation and prayer life, we can connect with and claim for ourselves its strength, stability, and wisdom.

This week, I want to invite you to go to your mountain and ponder the question of attentiveness. To whom or to what do you need to pay attention? Is it your body or your diet? Is it your family or your work? Is it your politics or your civic engagement? Is it your prayer life or your spiritual practice? Is your world or your God? Quite possibly, in fact probably, it is some combination of all of the above. And as you're paying attention, allow yourself to be astonished by what you see and hear. And if it seems appropriate, be courageous enough to talk about it. Perhaps our spiritual task is as straightforward as Mary Oliver suggests: "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."