

March 2, 2025
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
Trinity, St. Louis
The Reverend Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-43a

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator,
the source of our being,
the love at our beginning, and without end. Amen.

I want to start by asking a question. Can you think of a time when you knew that you were in the presence of something Holy? Something holy that had something to say to you? In today's Gospel, Luke gives us two such times: one on the mountain, one down below. One glorious and well known, the other painful and less known. Listen to this imaginative retelling.

"On the mountaintop, Jesus erupts into sudden light. As his sleepy disciples cower in the grass, two figures appear out of time and space. In solemn tones, they speak of Jerusalem, departure, and accomplishment. In response, the disciples babble – "This is good! Let's make tents! Let's stay here forever!" Then a cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelops the disciples, they fall to their faces, perhaps anticipating death. But a Voice addresses them, tender and gentle. The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, a bit braver now, glance up. They gaze at Jesus –the Shining One – while a Parent's pure joy sings with the stars: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him."

"Meanwhile, in the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He shrieks and drools, and his eyes – wide-open and feral – see nothing but darkness. Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle. Scribes jeer, and Jesus' disciples wring their hands in embarrassment. "Frauds!" someone yells into the night. "Where's your Master? Why has he left you?" "We don't know," the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Fear and exhaustion rage as they watch the boy claw at his own face. A voice – strangled, singular – pierces the night. "This is my son!" a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the child against his chest. "Please," he sobs to the stars. "Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him."¹

What does it mean that these two episodes, stretched thin, almost to breaking, between fullness and emptiness, between ecstasy and despair, between light and shadow, share this narrative? And, what might it mean that there are two beloved sons?

¹ Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus*, adapted.

Perhaps we might start by thinking about where “here” is. “Here” is a thin place, which Barbara Brown Taylor describes like this.

“Thin places are transparent places or moments, set apart by the quality of the sunlight in them, or the shadows, or the silence, or the sounds—see how many variations there are? What they have in common is their luminosity, the way they light an opening between this world and another—I’d [like to] say ‘between this world and the next,’ but that makes it sound like one world has to end before the next one can begin, and a thin place doesn’t work like that. It works to make you more aware of the thin veil between apparent reality and deeper reality. It works to pull aside the veil for just a moment, so you can see through.”²

When that the veil is pulled aside you know, you *know*, that you are in the presence of something holy, the Really Real – the Most Real.

Sometimes a thin place causes a change in us that only others can see – like Moses and his shiny face. Sometimes a thin place takes your breath away: when you’re lost in the beauty of a sunset, or in a piece of music, or in the face of a loved one who’s long been away. A birthing room is a thin place. So, too, are death beds and jail cells. The altar is a thin place. All of these can offer us a brief, unveiled glimpse of God...because God is always in all those places.

This is why these two seemingly disconnected stories about thin places go together; they must go together. God is speaking in the glory; God is speaking in the agony. And because God is in both the glory and the agony, the arms of God can embrace and enfold everything that you and I will ever experience; all of our hopes and all of our fears.

We stand today at another thin place – the eve of our annual Lenten journey. When we want to stand still and build booths, God tells us to listen to Jesus and get moving. We are not called to capture, preserve or fossilize life. We are called to listen and live life – on foot.

In the course of your journey, maybe you’ll hear glory. Maybe you’ll hear agony. Whatever you hear, don’t flinch. Don’t flee. Don’t assume that one voice must drown out the other. Both voices need to speak. Both voices need to be heard. Both voices have much to teach us. So, listen. Listen. Both voices are from a beloved Parent, assuring us that neither the dazzling child on the mountaintop nor the seizing child rolling in the dirt will be abandoned or forgotten.

Peter, James, and John heard God say, “This is my Son, my chosen; *listen* to him!” In a world bustling with noise and chaos, where words and rhetoric are weaponized, designed to roil up angst and rage, perhaps “listen” is the word from God that we need to hear today. In the midst of the joys and heartbreaks of the world; in the face of the

² <http://floatingintheblue.blogspot.com/2012/04/barbara-brown-taylor-on-thin-places.html>

delight and despair that surrounds us, God beckons us, ever so gently: *Listen. Listen to my beloved.*

Lent is upon us, those great forty days of preparation for the even greater fifty days of the Easter feast. The reason that we set aside some of our creature comforts in Lent is to re-tune our ears. To open ourselves to the possibility that the Holy has something to say to us. Listen.

Listen not only to Jesus' words, but also to his life. A life of Jesus coming *down* from the mountaintop, all the way down, into the depths of your life, your vulnerability, your anxiety and your dread. In traveling to Jerusalem, to the cross, to the grave, and *through* the grave, Jesus embraces and redeems everything. Everything that is hard, difficult, and even despicable in life, in order to wring life from the jaws of death itself! Listen.

If you can hold on to the notion that God abides in both the thin place of glory, *and* the thin place of agony, you might come to live in hope, knowing that wherever you may go, Christ has already been, and that where Christ is now, you will one day be.

Jesus, the human face of the Love that dances at the heart of things, is not seeking out a nice single file-line of the pious and the saintly. Jesus seeks out the lost, the damaged, the broken – that's us, folks. This is precisely the reason that Jesus was born, lived, died and was raised again...that we might know that God is unrelentingly and persistently *for us!*

So, then, trusting in the mercy of the One who entered the dark places of the world and still seeks out the dark places of our lives – trusting this One, perhaps you can become courageous enough to name what is broken and hurting in your life, fear it a little less, and reach out to those who are broken and hurting in the world around you.

In each and every thin place, especially in the transfigured Christ, and at this altar, God pulls aside the veil to give us a glimpse, a reminder, of our nature and our destination. The Holy One has something to say to you. So, as you navigate your Lenten journey, with all its crossroads and potholes...

Listen. Even when it is difficult.

Listen. Even when it doesn't make sense.

Listen Even when the people around you don't seem to get it.

Listen to Jesus. Eventually, I believe, we all will. And how foolish are we if we do not treat Jesus' faith and love as our greatest opportunity and a profound gift, freely given. Amen.