

Being and Doing
Matthew 17:1-9
February 23, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

As you know, I spend a lot of time in the car. I drive here. I drive to San Antonio and Austin. A couple weeks ago I drove to Rockport. There's a trip to Brownsville coming up in the next couple of months. I mean, I'm no Bill Rutherford, but I do travel around quite a bit, and it's all by car. Most of my travels take me through areas of our state where the radio coverage isn't reliable, and my tastes have turned away from music anyway, and more toward listening to talking. I mostly listen to podcasts, which are basically a thirty minute to an hour program on any topic you can imagine. I rarely listen to religious podcasts, as you might have first guessed, but there's a cooking one I like, some Texas-focused ones, some news shows, and my new favorite is about language—linguistics and regional differences and old-fashioned sayings.

In a week when I have an extra amount of driving, I'll check out an audiobook from the library, but I'll confess that my attention wanders excessively, so it has to be an audiobook that is easy to follow. Though I prefer reading fiction, I prefer listening to non-fiction for reasons I've not figured out yet. Probably because my attention wanders excessively. My most recent audiobook was the story of the founding and development of the organization called "Partners in Health," which began clinics and hospitals in Haiti and fights AIDS and tuberculosis around the world. It was interesting, and I learned things I hadn't known before, and now I have some new people to admire.

Pretty much no matter what I'm listening to in the car: music, news, podcast, I have noticed the following phenomenon. If traffic gets bad, or it starts raining really hard, or especially if I don't know precisely where I'm going, I turn down the music or turn off the talking. When I need to pay attention to the directions I've written down or I'm looking for a house number or a street sign, I can't have the radio talking to me or playing music. My brain can't handle it. I understand that I'm not the only person to have this happen. Maybe it's happened to you, too. I can drive and listen at the same time. But I can't drive and look for something and listen at the same time.

Human beings, despite being encouraged to multitask, and despite our seeming success at multitasking, are really creatures who do best when we're doing one thing at a time. Studies show that when a person is, for instance,

cooking supper, doing homework, and reading email at the same time, this person is not really multi-tasking, but is switching back and forth, rapid style, with the result that none of the tasks gets adequate attention or time, and the person herself becomes exhausted much more quickly than if she had done those same three tasks one at a time.

Human beings also tend to think that doing something is better than doing nothing. And by “better,” I mean...more valuable, more worthy of praise, more morally right. For Protestants in the United States, it is deeply rooted in the Protestant work ethic, the idea that we prove our righteousness by working hard and then we are rewarded with riches and wealth. But I think it’s more universal than that. Our default behavior is to do something rather than nothing.

Think about how difficult it is to wait in a hospital room when a loved one is ill. You can do very little. You feel helpless. Some people try to tidy up the counter, or fluff the pillow an excessive number of times, or pace up and down the hallway. It’s hard not to do anything. Or, a friend of my parent’s had a terrible concussion. She was supposed to not do anything at all: no getting up, no reading, no watching tv, no talking, no listening. She was supposed to rest her brain by doing nothing. I can’t imagine how that would be possible.

I think we all understand that we, as human beings, prefer to *do* something. So I think we all understand Peter at the Transfiguration. Things are happening. He doesn’t understand them. The situation is moving quickly in ways that make very little sense to him. They’re up on a mountain, which is an obvious place to expect something extraordinary to happen, but really, who could have imagined this? Jesus is radiating light. Moses and Elijah are somehow there, and Peter feels that very human need to *do* something.

So Peter says to Jesus, “It’s great that we’re here and all. Tell you what. I’ll make us some tents, ok, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah. Just let me find some materials and I’ll get started.” You can almost see Peter dusting his hands off and making a list of supplies in his head. He has no earthly idea what is going on, but he has thought of something he can *do*.

The Gospels agree that Peter makes this suggestion. Why? Well, I can imagine several reasons. It’s a pretty human impulse to want to have some tangible object to commemorate a deeply spiritual moment. People build churches on holy places. Other people pick up rocks or shells from places they’ve felt particularly close to God. We give gifts at baptisms and ordinations. We want to have something we can look at, something we can touch, so that on our bad

days we can remind ourselves, “that really happened. That was a good day. God really *was* there and God really *is* here even when it doesn’t feel like it.”

There’s also a possibility that Peter was associating the whole experience with the Jewish Feast of Booths, in which Jewish people build small shelters to remember the tents they lived in while wandering in the wilderness, and God’s tabernacle that traveled with them. Again, Peter is just trying to make sense of what is happening.

And lastly, Peter might simply be wanting to show hospitality. Moses and Elijah, the figures associated with the Law and the Prophets, the figures in Jewish tradition that had not died but had ascended directly to heaven, these towering figures of his faith, had suddenly appeared on top of the mountain with Jesus. Peter lived in a time and culture of tremendous hospitality, so it would have been natural for him to try to make these two visitors from another time and place feel welcome. Food, shelter, water, the basic necessities.

So Peter may have had very good and logical reasons for wanting to build shelters for Moses and Elijah and Jesus. But at the bottom of his suggestion is the human impulse to do something, to be busy, to somehow be productive and have something to show for ourselves.

Up until this point, Matthew’s version of the Transfiguration is pretty much like Mark’s and Luke’s versions. There are a few, small differences—Peter calls Jesus “Lord” here instead of “Rabbi” or “Master,” and there are differences in the order of the details of the white clothes and dazzling light. But what happens next is different, and I think this difference is significant.

While Peter is still speaking, he’s still asking Jesus about making these dwellings, with the assumption that Jesus will think that building something is a great thing to do at this transfiguration moment, while Peter is still making the suggestion, God interrupts. In the other Gospels, there’s an intervening sentence or two. But in Matthew, God stops Peter in the middle of his thought.

It’s not recorded, but I’m pretty sure that God says something like “Peter. Shush.” It’s certainly implied. What *is* recorded is that God says exactly the same thing that God said at Jesus’s baptism, before any of the disciples had come to follow Jesus. “This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.” Word for word, that’s what the voice from heaven says at the baptism, and that’s what the voice from the cloud says at the transfiguration.

But then God adds a little something. “This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” Listen to him.

Peter. Hush. Stop. Don't *do* anything. It's not necessary. You're distracting yourself from what's really important. Just listen to Jesus. Be still. Just be.

Stop doing three things at once. Turn down the radio so you can see where you're going. Stop doing and start being.

We, of course, are faced with Peter's temptation. We can find any number of things to do, lots of them good things, rather than just be. Lots of times, we want to commemorate the experience we are having, so we pull out the phone and take a picture. Lots of times, we want to alleviate someone else's or our own emotional pain, so we cook a pan of brownies or busy ourselves with other tasks. Lots of times, we simply don't know what to do, so rather than just be, we do something, anything, the first thing we think of.

One of the first things we learned in seminary about how to care for people who have experienced a death in their families, is to just sit with them, to say nothing, to be. It's also the thing that it takes a lifetime to learn, because it's so hard. Sitting, doing nothing, saying nothing, turning aside from the temptation to make a little joke or say something useless, it's all so hard.

Stop. Stop doing. Start being. And the key to being, as God said to Peter and James and John, is to listen. And specifically, to listen to Jesus. Turn away from the other distractions. Stop creating distractions. And listen to Jesus.

I'm going to close with a prayer. I'm not sure how it came to my computer screen, but it was originally written by a woman in New Zealand.¹ I think it's something Peter needs to hear, and so do we:

Shush, my heart—rest in the Lord.

Close, my eyes—rest in the Lord.

Thoughts—stop rushing.

Body—relax!

Oh my soul—be calm and quiet.

Breathe in and out and be still.

Big ideas and important jobs can wait.

Yesterday's hurts and tomorrow's worries can drift off,

For here and now, I am held in the arms of God

Like a little child half asleep in her mother's arms.

Trust in the Lord in this moment and forevermore. Amen.

¹ <http://www.conversations.net.nz/>