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Colorado Springs, Colorado  
February 21, 2016  
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## Lent with Luke: 1. Who's In Your Head?

Luke 9:28-36 The Message About eight days after saying this, he climbed the mountain to pray, taking Peter, John, and James along. While he was in prayer, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became blinding white. At once two men were there talking with him. They turned out to be Moses and Elijah—and what a glorious appearance they made! They talked over his exodus, the one Jesus was about to complete in Jerusalem. 32-33 Meanwhile, Peter and those with him were slumped over in sleep. When they came to, rubbing their eyes, they saw Jesus in his glory and the two men standing with him. When Moses and Elijah had left, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, this is a great moment! Let's build three memorials: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He blurted this out without thinking. 34-35 While he was babbling on like this, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them. As they found themselves buried in the cloud, they became deeply aware of God. Then there was a voice out of the cloud: "This is my Son, the Chosen! Listen to him." 36 When the sound of the voice died away, they saw Jesus there alone. They were speechless. And they continued speechless, said not one thing to anyone during those days of what they had seen.

We've all had the experience. You go to the kitchen drawer and get out the scissors for a project in the next room and all of a sudden there is this voice in your head, unbidden and un-asked for, of a parent saying "*Don't run with scissors.*" This, despite the fact, that you have no plans for scissor-scampering and that you have safely transported scissors between rooms on many occasions. Or you are pool-side or maybe on a lovely beach somewhere, on a hot summer's day, drinking something tall and cold and maybe snacking on some goodies from the picnic basket. But then you get too hot and want to take a quick dip to cool off, and you stand and fling the towel off and head for the water. But you have company; all of a sudden, out of nowhere, is the voice in your head of a parent or grandparent or some "expert" saying "*No swimming for*

*an hour after you've eaten.*" It gets louder the closer you get to the water despite the fact that you know that doctors have debunked that voice many times.<sup>1</sup>

Or sometimes those voices in your head are not so trivial. You're about to begin a project or you are making a life-changing decision or you're about to do something you've never done before and all of a sudden there's that voice in your head – maybe from an unhappy boss somewhere in your past, maybe from a friend who was really no friend at all, maybe even, sadly, from a parent – that starts saying things like *"Oh, you know you'll screw this up... You know that you won't succeed... You know that someone else could do this better than you can."* And those voices deflate your energy and cause you to doubt and leave you sad. Or worse, voices come into your head for no reason in the midst of an ordinary day, voices perhaps from a failed relationship or failed friendship that say *"You'll never amount to anything... You're worthless..."*

Voices like those go deep, don't they? They don't usually go away by themselves, and usually their power is rendered impotent only by the grace of a good therapist or a loving friend or spouse or partner. I once buried a 97-year-old man who, in one of our last conversations, told me how he could never get the perfectionistic, accusatory, belittling voice of his father out of his head - even though his father had been dead himself for over sixty years. Writer Anne Lamott says that such "Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor.... It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life."<sup>2</sup> "Quieting these voices," she says, "is at least half the battle I fight

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. <https://www.dukemedicine.org/blog/myth-or-fact-should-you-wait-swim-after-eating> or [http://www.medicinenet.com/summer\\_debunking\\_summer\\_health\\_myths/views.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/summer_debunking_summer_health_myths/views.htm) which points out that "...an episode of drowning caused by swimming on a full stomach has never been documented. "

<sup>2</sup>Quoted at <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/11/22/bird-by-bird-anne-lamott/>

daily..... Left to its own devices, my mind spends much of its time having conversations with people who aren't there."<sup>3</sup>

Those voices of the expectations from the past, those fragments of voices from long ago, the categories and concepts that we have used over the years to try to make sense of things, accompany all of us on our daily journeys through life. We can't help it. Not all of those voices in our heads, voices from the past, are bad ones and some of them indeed can be wondrous and just what we need to hear when life is hurting: the mother's voice that comes to us out of nowhere that says "*Never forget that no matter who you are or what you do I will always love you,*" the voice of your child the first time you were called "*Daddy*" or "*Mommy*" can be a grace-filled voice that reminds you that you are indeed loving and nurturing. There is nothing quite so marvelous as when the spouse you treasure so deeply says "*I love you so much.*" Sometimes when I am down on myself, not sure that I have loved as well as I could, the voice of our daughter comes to me in the words of she wrote me a few years ago saying that for my Christmas present she'd given to an organization in Central American that made blankets for children – with a card said "*To my Daddy, who has always kept me warm.*"

The point is that good or bad, helpful or hurtful, salutary or sad, constructive or destructive, you and I can't help but have such voices in our heads because there is no alternative except having learned from experience. And our experiences get inside of us and form our expectations. We use the past to try to understand the present. We listen to the voices in our heads from earlier in our lives to try to make sense of our lives

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted at  
<http://www.mbird.com/2013/03/anne-lamott-on-dropping-whiny-guilt-mongering-voices-into-mason-jars/>

now. Such is life and such is inescapable.

All of this is a long introduction to saying that while there are dozens of ways to talk about and preach about our scripture for this morning, the story that normally goes by the name of “the transfiguration of Jesus,” the one that most fascinates me on this day is the response of those disciples to that amazing, mysterious, overwhelming event that they experienced there on that mountaintop with Jesus. Let’s recap the story. Jesus will soon turn towards Jerusalem, the place where he knows that he will suffer and die. Before he does so, though, he ascends to the top of Mount Tabor, an 1800-foot summit in Galilee that was steeped in Jewish history. He takes with him what I like to think of as the Disciples Executive Committee - Peter, James, and John. Jesus is praying and the disciples – who, remember, were flatlander fishermen, probably not used to scaling 1800-foot hills – were asleep. But then they wake up and see the figure of Jesus transformed – “transfigured” – blindingly, intensely lit up like a beacon, two similar figures beside him. The disciples don’t know what to say. But Peter – impatient, impetuous, imperfect Peter – speaks.

This is a key point in this story. Because, you see, I imagine that in that moment Peter is frantically trying to listen to all the voices from the past in his head that might give him a clue as to what he’s seeing now, canvassing all his past experiences to try to figure out what this new experience means, what category it can be slotted into. And various translations render Peter’s words in different ways, reflecting, I think, all those voices that he is trying to listen to tell him what this means. Petersen’s Message translation says “Let us build three memorials.” A more common translation is “let us build three booths” or “let us build three tents.” Other translations render the word as

“shelters,” or “tabernacles” or “shrines.” Each of these possible translations is legitimate and each one of them refers back to something in Jewish history or something in Jewish tradition. The word “booth” recalls the Jewish feast of Sukkot. The word “memorial” harkens back to a battle on the same mountain against the Canaanites fought long ago under the command of Deborah. The word “tent” or “tabernacle” refers to the time of the Exodus from Egypt when the Ark of the Covenant was kept in a tent, a tabernacle, as the Hebrew people wandered for forty years.

Each of these voices and each of these words, I want to say, were in Peter’s head as he desperately tried to give a name to and make sense of what he is seeing now from his experience in the past. But it didn’t work. None of these voices in his head were adequate to truly capture what he was seeing. The text not-so-politely acknowledges this when it says he was “babbling.” So what happens then? Well, into Peter’s and the disciples’ bafflement there comes a new voice. In my mind’s ear I imagine it booming out as might be said by Barbara Jordan or James Earl Jones or Morgan Freeman or Star Trek’s Captain Picard: ***"This is my Son, the Chosen! Listen to him."*** Listen to him. Put **his** voice in your head. Pay attention to what **he** is trying to teach you. Listen hard for how he is both fulfilling the Jewish tradition in which he is steeped and also transforming and extending it.

You’ve heard of hormone replacement therapy? Well, what this ancient story is describing is “voice replacement therapy.” And sometimes that is exactly what you and I need, for the voices in our heads just are no longer relevant enough, no longer helpful enough, even destructive, to help us navigate forward in our lives. In fact, one way of describing a certain kind of therapy is indeed that it seeks to replace hurtful voices with

voices that are more appropriate, that are more realistic, that are less destructive. It doesn't have to be a therapist, though; those of us fortunate enough to have a spouse who is both wise and loves us in ways that we sometimes don't deserve can help replace those hard and hurtful voices, those perfectionistic and judgmental voices, with kinder and gentler voices. Many of us have known friends who were able to help us pluck certain voices out of our heads and replace them with ones that helped us live better. And God, of course, is always in the transformation business, always wants to help us transcend and overcome and replace such voices that kill our spirits and maim our hopes.

That is also what Jesus wants for us. It's why God said to those disciples and says to us "*Listen to him!!*" For all of us at times have voices in our heads that are not the voice of Jesus' unconditional love for each and all. There are voices in our heads that tell us that some people are to be feared because they are "different" even though the voice of Jesus says otherwise. There are voices in our head that tell us that God cannot truly love us, that we cannot measure up, that we must earn God's love even though the voice of Jesus is a voice that reminds us that God is about amazing grace not joyless judgmentalism and that no one earns God's love or fails to earn God's love for it is simply a given.

My friends, this morning, I would ask you: what voices are in your heads that come from the past but which increasingly don't help you live into a new future? What voices do you need to replace so that you can indeed hear the nurturing voice of Jesus over the tumultuous noise that sometimes inhabits your head and heart. What voices from your past have haunted you and bedeviled you? What voices may have

demonized or dehumanized this or that category of folks and have made you less able to hear the voice of Jesus reminding you that everyone is your neighbor?

Do you have any of those voices? I know I do sometimes. And so my prayer for you and for me this day is that, indeed, the voice of God, the voice of our gentle savior, might be the voice that comes to the fore, that is the one that speaks most clearly to us, the voice that ever and always and only speaks of new life and new hope. Can you hear it? Can you hear it?