I feel like, whenever I hear this story read—and often even when I read it, the emphasis in the message from the voice is on the verb: “LISTEN to him.” The implication is that we, like Peter, are so busy trying to talk, to come up with answers or to fill the silence or to just calm ourselves down, that we have a hard time listening to what we are being told. However, today as I read this, I begin to wonder if we shouldn’t instead be reading that verse with the emphasis on the direct object: “This is my son, the Beloved; listen to HIM.”

After all, let’s consider the scene. Peter finds himself suddenly in the presence of Moses and Elijah, two of the most colossal figures from Jewish history. Imagine standing on the Mall in Washington, DC when all of a sudden George Washington and Abe Lincoln appeared before you. Peter is star-struck! Here he is with his rabbi and the Greatest Lawgiver and the Greatest Prophet of all time. Of course, he wants to take advantage of their wisdom, to sit at their feet and learn all there is to learn from them. He is so amazed by these historical celebrities that he—somehow—becomes blind to the literally dazzling figure of his own rabbi in front of him. The words from the cloud, then, aren’t and admonition to stop talking and start listening, but a reminder to whom he ought to be paying attention.

I’ve heard lots of people speculate over the years about what Jesus was talking about with Moses and Elijah. Were they debating the finer points of the law? Maybe commiserating over the burden of speaking to God’s people on God’s behalf? Some have thought that this scene demonstrates that Jesus is on par with these great people from history; but I wonder if this story doesn’t function a bit like the story of the boy Jesus in the temple from Luke’s gospel. Luke tells that story to show that, even as a twelve-year-old, Jesus had the knowledge and the authority to teach the teachers. Maybe here, Mark is showing us that Jesus has the knowledge and the authority to teach the greatest teachers of all time. Peter is star-struck by meeting these great historical figures, but perhaps he should have been more star-struck by the man he’s been following for 9 chapters already.

It seems to me that, like Peter, our problem isn’t listening. We try very, very hard to listen, and to imitate, extrapolate, and obey the wisdom we find in Scripture. No, I think that the more pressing challenge that we have is figuring out *to whom* we ought to be listening. There are all kinds of teachers in our lives—past and present—who are very eager to tell us just what God wants us to do, and how God wants us to do it. Unfortunately, one need not listen very long to figure out that these teachers often disagree with one another. Even though we all look back to the same source of authority—the Bible—we often come away with very, very different conclusions about what is right, what is moral, or what is just.

Last week, we as a congregation undertook an exercise in listening. We took a seemingly simple question—“What is the Church’s role in society?”—and looked at three seemingly simple possibilities. One was that the Church ought to be a place of refuge, where people can leave their differences outside and come together over what we have in common. Another was that the Church ought to be a place of mediation, where we create safe space to fairly consider all opinions and perspectives with curiosity and respect. The third was that the Church ought to be a prophetic voice, confidently separating right from wrong and calling people to a holy and moral life.

What we found as we listened was that this simple question didn’t have any simple answers. We wrestled with these three possibilities, finding merits and drawbacks to all of them, and we wondered if they needed to be mutually exclusive, or if there was room for a mix of two or even all three within the ministry of the Church. We didn’t come to a conclusion about what the role our congregation should play in society, but we did notice that, regardless of our opinions about each option, we heard a lot of common motivations.

We all thought the Church ought to be a place that is open to as many people as possible, a place where people felt loved and respected and where everyone had a voice. We all wanted to remain true to our tradition and identity as Christian people while respecting the dignity and integrity of other traditions and identities around us, and we all wanted to do our best to follow the direction of God. Above all, there was a great concern for helping and caring for the people around us.

Sometimes those motivations are best served by focusing on what we have in common, rather than what separates us; sometimes, by making room to discuss our differing opinions and interpretations of Scripture; sometimes, by taking a stand on what we believe is non-negotiable, especially when it comes to protecting folks who have been marginalized and placed in vulnerable positions. We didn’t think that the Church should back down from the challenge of trying to address the problems of the world, but we saw that there are different ways to do it. We recognized that people come to the Church from many different places in their faith journeys, and we hoped that the Church might be able to provide a way for people in each place to engage in a way that was meaningful and true to how God is calling them.

We arrived at these observations by listening; but it is to whom we were listening that makes this exercise valuable. It’s my experience that we often want someone in a place of authority—a teacher, a pastor, a bishop—to tell us what the answers are; but each of those authorities can only tell us what they think, and the conclusions to which they have come. In this exercise, we listened to one another. When we listen to each other, we recognize the authority that we each have from our life experience, our education, and our faithful pondering to share in this conversation. It’s not the case that any one of us—not even teachers, pastors or bishops—have the overwhelming authority of Moses or Elijah. What we do have, though, is the authority of Jesus: authority that comes not from knowledge or experience or expertise, but from our connection to God through the Holy Spirit.

When we come together as a Church, we are transfigured. The whole is more than the sum of its parts: we become more than just a collection of individuals, we become a collection of individuals washed in baptism and sharing in a common calling. In other words, we become a collection of individuals in whom God is at work. The Spirit moves among us as we interact with one another, learn from and teach each other, and grow both as individuals and as a community. It’s a messy process, and terribly inefficient, but, for better or for worse, that is the process God has chosen to use to bring us closer to God’s vision of wholeness—the vision Jesus called the kingdom of God.

Although we did not decide on what role we as a congregation should take in society, we did decide that having that conversation was valuable. What this tells me is that this is where God is calling us now: to be in conversation with one another. We are so hungry to listen, and I think that we began to recognize the voice of God in that act of listening to our community.

Of course, our listening is not perfect, in part because our community is not perfect. We recognized as we deliberated that there are voices who were not in that conversation with us. We are a congregation primarily comprised of older, privileged White people. We wondered in our time together what perspectives and wisdom might be added by inviting voices belonging to younger adults and children, people living on the margins, people of color. I also heard people reflect on the reality that we are not always very good at inviting people in general, and wonder how we might do better.

I find that question particularly edifying, because whenever we in the Church talk about inviting others into our congregations, it’s always in the context of growing our membership or our giving base or supporting our ministries. But what if instead we were to think about how those we invite might change our congregations; might be part of creating new ministries or new patterns, might even change how we experience “church” entirely? What if inviting others into our congregation might be God’s way of transfiguring our entire concept of what the Church is and how it operates, making it brighter than anyone on earth could possibly make it? That thought scares us as much as that moment on the mountain scared Peter and James and John—but what if that is where Jesus is calling us? Shouldn’t we listen to HIM rather than our own instincts to just build more sanctuaries and classrooms?

I’ll admit, that conversation last week didn’t go quite how I expected it to go. There are lots of things that I would have changed if I could; but that’s part of what has been so great for me to watch this experience. Even though it didn’t go quite how I thought it should go, the Holy Spirit was there, moving among us, helping us think and change and grow, transfiguring us into something new. I’m excited to continue that conversation with you all; and I’m excited by the prospect of finding ways to invite new voices into that conversation. I’m excited not only by where we might end up, but by how we might get there, and by who we might become in the process.