Listen to Him!
Mark 9:2-10

What do you do when God tells you something you don’t want to hear? I had just such an experience a few months ago. Last November the detailer called and told me that I had successfully screened for an O6 chaplain milestone assignment. In the Chaplain Corps, chaplain Captain milestone screening is roughly equivalent to the major command screening experienced by members of the unrestricted line community. Once a chaplain is selected for an O6 milestone assignment, he or she is usually assigned as senior chaplain on staff to a numbered fleet, its Marine Corps equivalent, or a higher level headquarters element such as Fleet Forces, Pacific Fleet, or one of the Combatant Commands. This was very good news for me; it was an institutional affirmation of nearly 20 years’ service to God and country and I must confess that I was justifiably pleased.

Shortly after receiving that notification, I went to the Georgia Southern football game at Navy Marine Corps Memorial Stadium. And as I walked to the stadium I prayed about my future asking God for guidance regarding my next assignment. Where should I go? When should I go? What should I ask of the detailer? And what should I do in light of my family’s needs?

Suddenly, and unexpectedly, God spoke to me in a voice, not audible, but as clear as crystal and delivered an unusual message. “Go home and read the Gospel of Mark,” he said. “You’ll find all of your answers there.” So the next day I began to read Mark’s gospel and over the course of the following week God answered my questions with such clarity that by Saturday I knew exactly what he wanted me to do. And I wasn’t at all pleased about it.

My wife knew something was up. She came into the room Saturday morning while I was praying and could see from my expression that something wasn’t right. “What’s wrong,” she asked. “I’m troubled,” I replied. “Why?” she asked. “Because God is telling me something that I’m not ready to hear; he’s telling me to retire at the end of this assignment and I’m not ready to do that,” I answered. Retire in the summer of 2016? God was accelerating the timeline of my retirement by at least 2 years, more probably by 4-6 years, maybe by as many as 8-10 years, and he was derailing all of my own retirement plans. No, I wasn’t happy. In fact, I was so unnerved that I wrestled with God for two more weeks and at one point even asked God if I could safely ignore his guidance! Imagine that! Me, asking God if I could ignore him!

Has that ever happened to you? Has God ever told you something you didn’t want to hear? It happened to the disciples on more than one occasion. And it happened just before the events described in our text – Mark 9:2-10.
Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Today we remember how Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain and was transfigured before their very eyes with the light of his divine nature shining through the veil of his mortal flesh. But our text begins with these three words: “Six days later…Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them.” (Mk. 9:2)

“Six days later…” Those words beg the question: What happened six days prior to Jesus’ transfiguration? Well, six days prior to the transfiguration, Jesus asked his disciples a penetrating question. “Who do people say that I am?” he asked. And the disciples gave various answers. “Some say you are John the Baptist,” they said. (Mk 8:28) Now John the Baptist was dead by this time but he was such a great and powerful religious figure that some, including the man who killed him, believed that Jesus was John, raised from the dead.

Others said Jesus was Elijah. (Mk. 8:28) You see the prophet Malachi said Elijah would return to usher in the Messianic age. (Mal. 4:5-6) So some people thought Jesus was Elijah preparing the way for the coming Messiah. Finally, others said, “This Jesus is just a prophet.” (Mk 8:28) Just a prophet! “But who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked. And Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” (Mk 8:29)

Now the Jews of Jesus’ day were waiting for the Messiah. They believed the Messiah would be an anointed leader, sent by God to deliver God’s people, to punish God’s enemies, to establish God’s kingdom, and to inaugurate an era of prosperity and peace. In short, they believed the Messiah would throw off the yoke of Roman oppression and reestablish the Davidic Kingdom with Israel triumphant over all!

But that was an erroneous understanding of the Messiah’s mission. And because it was an erroneous understanding of the Messiah’s mission, Jesus had to correct their Messianic expectation. Yes, he had come to save his people. Yes he had come to defeat their enemies. Yes he had come to establish his kingdom. But he had come to save them from their sin, not from Roman domination. He had come to defeat the enemy of their souls, not their earthly enemies. He had come to establish a spiritual kingdom, not an earthly kingdom as commonly understood. And in order to accomplish that mission, he had to suffer, die, and rise again!

Yes, Jesus had to die in our place to pay the penalty for our sin. He had to be buried in our place to defeat the devil in his dark domain. He had to rise in our place to raise us from the dead. He had to ascend into heaven to open heaven for us. Yes, Jesus was the Messiah and he was on a saving mission but his mission would require suffering, death, burial, and resurrection. And that was a message the disciples didn’t want to hear. They didn’t want to hear about a suffering and dying Messiah. Rather, they wanted to hear about a triumphant and conquering Christ.
So Jesus had to correct their erroneous understanding of his Messianic mission. Thus, he “…began to teach (his disciples) that (he), the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again… and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” (Mk. 8:31-32) You see, Peter didn’t want to hear it! And Peter wasn’t alone. It must have been a shared sentiment because Jesus turned and looked at all of his disciples before rebuking Peter for his presumption.

Now if news of a suffering, dying Messiah wasn’t bad enough, Jesus uttered a second message that was just as bad and just as hard to hear. “Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life (alt. translation = soul)? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life (alt. translation = soul)? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mk. 8:34-38)

Wow! Jesus not only told his disciples that he had to suffer and die, but they must be willing to do so as well! It was a hard message – one they didn’t want to hear. And it remains just as hard to hear today! In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that great German Christian who opposed Hitler during World War Two and paid for it with his very life, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die!” In other words, we must be willing to deny ourselves, take up our own crosses, and follow Jesus wherever he leads us. We must be willing to say “No!” to ourselves so we can say an unqualified “Yes!” to Jesus Christ. We must place his will above our very own.

And that’s a hard message to hear. That’s why, just six days after Jesus delivered that message to his disciples, he took three of them up a tall mountain and was transfigured before them. And in that transfiguration, the light of his divine nature shined through the veil of his mortal flesh. And suddenly he was accompanied by Moses and Elijah. Moses was the great Lawgiver. Elijah was one of the greatest of the prophets. And the two of them together represented all of the law and all of the prophets bearing testimony to Jesus and confirming him as the true Messiah. And Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus about his departure, or the death he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. And so they confirmed the word Jesus spoke to his disciples about his suffering, death, burial, and resurrection.

And then, to climax it all, “…a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” (Mk. 9:7) Listen to him when he tells you that he must suffer and die! Listen to him when he tells you that you must deny yourself! Listen to him when he tells you that you must take up your own cross!
Listen to him when he tells you that you must follow him no matter what! Listen to him and give him your unqualified obedience! Listen to him and you will find your salvation. For remember what Jesus said, “...those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.” (Mk. 8:35)

I began this sermon with a simple question. What do you do when God tells you something you don’t want to hear? I end it with a simple admonition: Listen to him! I listened hard for three weeks last November. And the more I listened, the more sure I was that I was being called to retire at the end of this tour. So when the detailer called me at the beginning of December and told me that I was being assigned to a 4-star staff in June of this year, I said, “Hold the phone! Give me a week and I’ll give you an answer.” That’s when I called the Chief of Chaplains, visited her in her office and said, “Ma’am, I’ve been listening to Jesus!” I thanked her for her placing such confidence in me but told her that I wanted to complete my assignment at the Naval Academy and then retire in the summer of 2016.

Listen to him! Listen to him! Listen to him! That is where we find our salvation – both in this life and in the life to come. Around the time the detailer first called me, I wrote the following in my journal about the decision to retire: “Pamela and I are at peace with this decision – anxious, yes, about the changes, not fully certain where all of this will lead, grieving a bit about the end of this phase of life, sorry to say goodbye to friends and to an institution that has been so good to me – but at peace.” At peace and enjoying a growing sense of anticipation about what God might have in store.

Jesus said, “‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.’ (Mk. 8:34-35 ESV)

What do you do when God tells you something you don’t want to hear? You listen to him and find your salvation! Are you listening? Amen.