

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
February 27, 2022  
Luke 9:28-43  
Transfiguration Sunday

**“A Letter to McKenzie Grace Morley on the Occasion of her Baptism”**

Dear Kenzie,

Today is a very special day in your life. Your mom and dad, your family, friends of your family, members of the session, and members of First Presbyterian Church dedicated you to God. They acknowledged that you are God’s child, they promised to guide and nurture you with love and prayer, encouraging you to follow Christ, and they heard me say, “McKenzie Grace Morley, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Now I have said plenty of times, Kenzie, but it’s worth repeating again: I love to baptize children (and adults) more than anything else because there’s just an overwhelming joy for me at knowing that I was there with you at the beginning of your journey of faith. There’s also an overwhelming feeling of awe for me, even 26 years into my ministry, that I can baptize people because everything begins in your baptism, Kenzie. It inaugurates a whole new life for you. But there’s an overwhelming feeling of responsibility, too, because everyone here will promise before you and God to guide and nurture you and help you to know Christ better.

You see, Kenzie, we believe that at the heart of all our relationships is our baptism. Your baptism today is a sign and seal that God loves you, that God has called you to be in this special relationship, and that God is with you forever. Think of it as your initiation ceremony into the church.

Although you didn’t understand what happened that morning, we baptized you as a baby because it’s something in which our church believes. Presbyterians baptize babies and young children because we believe that

you are a part of God's family and included in God's family from the moment you're born.

On the Sunday we baptized you, Kenzie, we were celebrating Transfiguration Sunday. This is the Sunday we hear the story about Jesus, James, John and Peter going up a mountain, and when they get there Jesus' face and clothes turn a dazzling white (for no apparent reason), and then out of nowhere Moses and Elijah appear. It's an odd story, and truth be told for years I've struggled with just what to make of it. I mean, things like this don't happen in real life. At least, they've never happened to me.

And so all week, as I was thinking about this story and trying to find something to say about it, I couldn't help but keep going back to that phrase: "Listen to him." And that's a phrase I can relate to, Kenzie, because in addition to being a pastor, I'm a Mom – so I've repeated the phrase "listen to me" a hundred times over the years. And I've also heard the phrase "You're not listening to me," a hundred times over the years from my 4 kids. So I kept thinking about that phrase "Listen to him", and began to think that maybe the meaning of the story is in that phrase. Also, since God only speaks a few times in the Gospel of Luke, it's probably a good idea to listen when God does.

But Peter, in today's story from Luke, is doing more talking than listening and because of that he misunderstands what's really important. He's up on the mountain with Jesus and it's a glorious moment, so wonderful that Peter wants to hold on to it. "Master," he says, "it is good for us to be here; let us make 3 dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah . . ."

Well of course Peter wants to start a building campaign. Who can blame him? Life is good on the mountaintop. There, they are free of criticism. They're free from the detractors and deniers that have been on their tails. They're free of the hardship that has been a part of their ministry and the people they heal. Life is beautiful and grand and light and shiny on the mountaintop.

"Let's build! Let's memorialize! Let's just stay right here!"

But before Peter has a chance to finish his pitch for why they should build, Luke offers some commentary: “He didn’t know what he was saying.” In other words, Peter was so busy running his mouth, he wasn’t even listening to what he was saying. And because of that he missed the point. Didn’t understand that Jesus is all about living life and doing ministry on the plain.

This is why Jesus doesn’t even acknowledge Peter’s suggestion. He just starts heading down the mountain where a dreadfully sick boy and his desperate father are. And the disciples, dumbfounded but wise, said nothing and instead chose to listen and learn. And when they did that they saw Jesus go to work healing the boy of his convulsions, and then handing the boy back to his father.

Kenzie, when we take the time to listen to Jesus, to really listen to Jesus, we learn that Jesus is all about doing ministry on the plain and in the valley and because of that, we’re called to go down the mountain and live life on the plain, where the people are; where sons are healed and relationships are restored. In our baptisms, God calls us to undertake a life of service, and to go into the valleys where there are people who need to be healed and injustices that need to be brought to light.

Kenzie, as I wrote this sermon a country by the name of Ukraine was being invaded by Russia, and people there need help. But they aren’t the only ones. There are injustices in our very own city, and too many people go without adequate housing and food.

So as much as we may want to remain on the mountaintop, Kenzie, there is work to be done out on the plain. Our calling as Christians, is to go down the mountain and be in ministry with other people, and support them in their time of need.

Kenzie, over the course of your lifetime you’ll hear billions of words spoken and many of the words will tell you that the mountaintop is the goal. You’ll hear people tell you what matters most is how you look, what you wear, how much money you make, or what job you have. You’ll hear people encourage you to do what’s cool or popular. You’ll hear people tell you that

you need to go to the right school, and live in the right neighborhood, and hang out with the right people – all with the goal of getting to the mountaintop no matter what you have to do to get there. But the mountaintop isn't the goal, at least not for someone who is baptized. Serving in the valleys, is – so everyone can get to the mountaintop. So it will be hard at times to make a commitment to actively listen to Jesus, and actively respond.

And there will be other times, Kenzie, when you will feel like you are on anything but a mountaintop and the plains will stretch out before you and you'll face obstacles in your life. During these times, it will be even more important to remember your baptism, and the words that were said to you today: McKenzie Grace Morley, you are God's beloved, and marked as Christ's own forever. So remember, no matter where you are and no matter the obstacles you face, Christ is with you forever.

So Kenzie, "Listen to him." Listen to what he says. Watch what he does. Listen and watch as he walks down from the mountain into the valley of human need and there confronts humanity at its most human, in the form of a sick child and a desperate parent. Listen and watch as he describes and then lives out a whole new way to be human and to be faithful, the way of selfless love.

Listen as he says, "Whoever welcomes this child welcomes me."

Listen as he tells about an outcast who stops by the roadside to bind up the wounds of his enemy and about a father who runs down the road and opens his arms to welcome his son home.

Listen as he says, "Love your enemy—love one another."

Listen as he says, "Forgive them for they know not what they do."

Listen and watch as he gives his life away for others.

Listen as he says, "Do not be afraid."

Listen as he says, "The one who saves life will lose it and the one who loses life for my sake will find it."

And so listen and follow. Because . . .

Would the world not be a better place if nations listened to one another?  
Would our country not be better off if we started listening to one another?  
Would our relationships not be better if we listened to one another?

Listen to him, God said. Listen to him.

Kenzie, wherever you go, remember the grace of God and God's assurance that you belong to the God who created you. God gave us all the sacrament of baptism today so that we might all be strengthened and reminded of God's grace and rededicate ourselves to being disciples of Christ.

Kenzie, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace today and every day.

Amen.

*A sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling, Pastor/Head of Staff of First Presbyterian Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the occasion of McKenzie Grace Morley's baptism, February 27, 2022.*