

“Listening to Jesus, Looking at the World”
February 15, 2026

Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

Martin Noth, one of the great, mid-century German Old Testament scholars, wrote of the account of Moses from the book of Exodus that we heard this morning: “This story is hard to assess.”

And Fred Craddock, a widely respected preacher and teacher of preachers, said of the story from the Gospel of Matthew: “There’s not much here that relates to our world.”

I like it when scholars talk like this. It means that I am not alone in my confusion. It means that *you* are not alone, if, after listening to the scripture lessons this morning, you were asking yourself: “What was *that* all about?”

Let’s be honest. There is no immediate connection between these stories and our lives. There is no advice on how to deal with people. There is no immediate connection between these stories and our lives at home or work or school. We can’t draw quick lessons about how to deal with ICE or how to live with the daily degradation of values and principles we long thought inviolable.

Maybe that’s for the best. We don’t always need to rush to find the “moral” of scripture lessons. We can refrain from asking about the take-away. These “hard to assess” stories ask us to stay with them just a little while longer. Instead of jumping to conclusions, we are invited simply to wonder a little more than we might otherwise.

Some of the best stories in the Bible do not speak to us directly in our present circumstances. Instead, they jar us out of our familiar world and carry us—however briefly—someplace we’ve never been.

We need to hear stories like these because, as I said two weeks ago—and warning: I will be saying this quite often in the days ahead—these are not normal times. Our nation and the world are changing in many ways.

Who knows where we are headed? Will we make America great again? Will the elections this fall fail us as we descend into autocracy? Which will come first—nuclear destruction or global transformation brought on by uncontrolled and uncontrollable climate change?

In these not-normal times, then, for a few minutes this morning, let us turn our attention to one of those stories that is not normal: Jesus talking with the long dead Moses and Elijah. Jesus shining with a never-before seen radiance. And the clear voice of God coming out of a cloud as it does in some *New Yorker* cartoon.

That voice tells us to “listen” to Jesus.

What do we hear?

Six days earlier, Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Listen to Jesus: the One who suffers as we suffer—who knows the human experience of being wounded and hurting deeply;

Listen to Jesus: the One who knows what it means to be rejected, to have the very best one has to offer be judged as insufficient;

Listen to Jesus: the One who is stretched to the limits of life, finding the courage for life even in the face of death.

The Jesus we hear doesn't always match up with what we are seeking—even if it fits very well with what we desire.

Consider that six days earlier, Jesus tells those closest to him: “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 will find it.”

His words disturb, and yet, if we listen carefully, we can hear a refreshing honesty in them as well. We hear words spoken to those who are already with Jesus; words spoken to people—like you and me—who understand themselves as accepted—not because we've earned it, not because we've been good—but simply because it is God's nature to love and accept us. The terms of following—the cost of discipleship—are stated up front. We know what we're getting into, where all of this is leading, before we begin.

Listen to Jesus—not just to what he says but to how he lives and how he dies. What we hear—ultimately—is resurrection: God bringing life from death; God holding all creation—the living and the dead—in God's great eternal love.

Listening to all that Jesus is and all that Jesus does, we can better hear the *one* thing that Jesus actually *does say* in this story.

“Get up and do not be afraid.”

“Get up.” In Matthew's gospel, when Jesus raises the dead, those are the words he uses. “Get up.” This is a call to new life, to resurrection. Listen: you are being called to something new.

“Get up.” Resurrection is not something that happens to Jesus alone. Resurrection is more than what some theologians refer to as “the Easter event.”

Resurrection is the new life that embraces us in these strange winter days, calling us to open our souls, calling us toward what University of Iowa graduate, Flannery O'Connor, called the “spring and summer of God's will.”

Resurrection comes toward us and we hear the invitation: “Get up.” Destruction, chaos, disruption, and fear are the goals of many in power. In the face of all that tears down and knock down: rise.

Stand.

Get up.

“And do not be afraid.” This, as you know—because I’ve said it countless times—is the message of Matthew’s Gospel from the angel who speaks to Joseph before Jesus is born to the angel who rolls away the stone at the empty tomb after the crucifixion. The angels—and remember that *angel* is simply a word that means “messenger”—the messengers of God speak with an angelic consistency.

And here is Jesus saying the same thing.

Fear is the goal of much that is being done in these days.

In the face of those actions and that fear, listen with an open heart. “Do not be afraid.”

Listen carefully, closely, intently.

Listen to Jesus.

Remember, however, that while we are told to listen to Jesus, we are not told to *look* at him.

Our gaze is turned elsewhere. It is always turned elsewhere.

Other people, other events, demand our attention.

We are called to look, even when we would much rather turn away.

Look at children taken away in Minneapolis and across our nation. Not just Liam Conejos Ramos with his Spiderman backpack—*hundreds* of children are being detained. Look at children dying in Gaza and Sudan and Ukraine.

Watch the summary execution of people on small boats in the Caribbean.

See the masked government agents in the streets of our cities and small towns.

Look at those millions of pages documenting the involvement of the rich and powerful with a sexual predator.

If we do not simply turn away in despair or disgust, the hope of many, it seems, is that we will become numb. We will accept all of this as the new normal.

The theologian, Richard Lischer, said recently that “it is everyone’s civic duty to keep an eye on injustice by the light of a better vision. It is a fundamental human duty to allow ourselves *to be touched* by what we see. The violence is so plentiful and easily accessed that it has assumed a routine quality.”

That brilliant light shining from Jesus in the story of the Transfiguration? It is there to shine on all the darkness in our world. It is there so we might see with greater clarity.

Lischer says: “Transfiguration is not an escape from reality. God gives us a better vision not to escape the suffering of others—or our own—but to strengthen us in the midst of it.”¹

Created in God’s image, we see that image broken in every conceivable way. We see human welfare considered apart from nature’s welfare. We see public morality separated from private morality.

Looking at the world, seeing what *really is*, we can offer others a new vision of the broken made whole.

We offer the vision of Christ’s body broken for us and Christ’s body fully resurrected: a vision of our human condition as wounded but gloriously whole. We can speak of resurrection, of God’s power to bring life out of death, health out of decay, restoration out of destruction.

We can hold out the possibility that something positive can come even from the worst of situations, even from death on a cross. There is a power that can still bring new life to our lives, and to our community, our nation, and our world.

This is nothing new. The Hebrew Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets—Moses and Elijah—tell of God’s involvement with the world. The God who creates all that is also guides God’s people with the Torah. The God who sustains also leads God’s people back with words of judgment and comfort spoken by the prophets. God does not abandon the world but in love stays with us.

This love, spoken of in the Torah and Prophets, is shown as well in the God who comes to us in Jesus of Nazareth, working for the reconciliation of all creation.

Listen to Jesus and look at the world—*look at the world with open eyes and open hearts*. In this way, we might become a *community of transfiguration*. We can’t offer a neat solution to every problem. But we can offer something needed even more—a vision of grace and compassion in controversy; a vision of justice and restoration in a time of growing chaos. And that is sorely needed in our nation.

As obscure and puzzling as it is, I often include this story of what is called the “transfiguration” of Jesus in our worship on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. As we move toward a time of thinking about our own mortality—and even more about the life-giving death and resurrection of Jesus—the curtain of reality is pulled back so that we can see where we are heading: toward new life in Christ.

In these not-normal times, it may be that the obscure and puzzling parts of the Bible will speak to us in fresh ways, allowing us to see with new understanding.

Listen to Jesus.

Look at the world.

These are not normal times and the road ahead will not be smooth.

The road ahead will not be easy.

Get up.

And do not be afraid.

¹ Richard Lischer, "Seeing with Clarity," *Christian Century*, Feb. 2026
[https://www.christiancentury.org/features/seeing-clarity?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=cbf1394a9f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2026-02-10&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-cbf1394a9f-\[LIST_EMAIL_ID\]](https://www.christiancentury.org/features/seeing-clarity?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=cbf1394a9f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2026-02-10&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-cbf1394a9f-[LIST_EMAIL_ID])