

***Speechless* – Mark 9:2-9**

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February 11, 2024

In his book *Wrestling with Doubt – Finding Faith*, pastor Adam Hamilton spends one of his chapters talking about the concept of heaven. For many people of faith and people who dismiss faith, heaven is a mystery that either begs our belief in it or causes us to disavow it.

One of the topics Hamilton addresses in this chapter on heaven is that of near-death experiences.

Researchers like Dr. Sam Parnia of New York University's Langone Medical Center have focused on what happens at death, and one part of that work has left him studying human consciousness. His research has indicated that ten percent of cardiac arrest patients who survived reported near death experiences, or what he calls after- or actual-death experiences.

Parnia contends that these experiences may well point to a human consciousness or soul that is intimately bound up with the brain but separate from it—and that it may continue after the brain and body have died.

In this chapter of his book, Adam Hamilton includes some of the near death experiences that those in his congregation have reported:

A woman named JoAnne described getting in trouble while swimming off the coast when she was twelve years old and was drawn into a riptide:

“The next thing I remember,” she said, “is that I am pulled under the water, then I find myself in the sky above looking at a bright tunnel of light. All my senses were more than 100%. I felt more alive than I ever had. At the same time, I saw my life (all twelve years) evaluated in a flash. Then, I remember looking down at the ocean and seeing my body floating, my friend's body floating. At that moment, I knew I had more to do here on earth. Then, I was back in the ocean. A man appeared who took my hand and took the hand of my friend. He pulled us back to shore.”

A woman named Barbara shared this about what happened to her as she gave birth to her triplets:

“I experienced a moment of transcendence—a radiant light with a tunnel ascending upward. I was surrounded by a divine and loving presence—the lightness and love I experienced defy description and are with me to this day. While drifting up, I looked down upon myself and the chaos of the operating room as more than a dozen health care professionals worked to save the lives of my children. My trip back to the operating table was abrupt, with several people speaking loudly at me to come back into consciousness. It was then that I had the clear understanding that I was sent back to attend to the unfinished business of raising my children.”

And finally, a woman named Nancy told of her husband’s glimpse of heaven before he died. He was unconscious and very near death.

“When he regained consciousness he said, ‘Did you think I was going to die?’ And I said yes. His reply was, ‘Well, I came back.’ He told me about seeing the bright light, and then his face just lit up when he told me he had seen his dad and my dad. No one believed that he had really seen them. I asked him if he talked to my dad and he said, ‘Yes, he told me not to be a schmuck.’ I started laughing because that is exactly what my dad would say. My dad told him he should come back and say goodbye to people. And that’s what he did. He lived two more weeks and was able to see friends.”

As Dr. Parnia and other researchers have contended, these experiences point to the truth that our consciousnesses or souls survive our deaths.

The people who have had these experiences had a moment that will stand or stood with them for the rest of their lives. It was unexplainable and, in their own unique ways, left them speechless.

In Mark 9, the disciples who went to the top of the mountain with Jesus had a similar experience. Before Peter, James, and John, Jesus was changed (transfigured is the churchy word). His clothes became so white, Mark says, that nobody on earth could brighten them.

In experiencing this, Peter (after he told Jesus he wanted to build a dwelling for him, Elijah, and Moses) “did not know what to say. For they were terrified.”

In the many experiences the disciples had already had with Jesus, this one may have been the most memorable. For Mark says, they were left speechless.

Have you ever been moved to the point of being surprised or astonished that you didn't know what to say? We all have to different extents. Some of the experiences are horrible; some are hugely joyful. All of them are memorable.

However, the moments like these that cause us to change our lives or go in a different direction are rare. Most of the time, we're shocked by something we see that we never expected. But the euphoria eventually fades and we continue on the same path.

Sometimes though, these moments, like a near-death experience, are life-changing.

For Peter and the other disciples, God used the occasion of changing or transfiguring Jesus right in front of them to get their attention and thereby do something. And for them it was this: "This is my beloved son," God said. "Listen to him."

It was almost as if God meant to say, "Hey you guys. You've answered the call to follow. That's admirable. But you're not quite getting the gist of what he's all about. But if you'd paid a little closer attention and focus a little more, there will be some revelations and insight that could lead you closer to him."

The stunning transfiguration of Jesus led God to call them to action. Listen to *him*.

Holy, mysterious, stunning, and incredible experiences are most meaningful when they lead us to do something.

In the cases of the near-death experiences I just shared, the people who lived them were led to action. Joanne, the woman pulled under the ocean's waters and who found herself floating above the water's surface in her near-death experience, was compelled to do something more with her life as she saw her and her friend's body floating on the surface. Barbara, the woman who died giving birth to her triplets, says that in her moment of hovering above the operating table and witnessing the chaos down below, realized that she had unfinished business—raising her children.

And Nancy's husband, who saw her dad and his dad in heaven for a brief moment and was called a schmuck, came back and saw friends for a couple weeks before he died.

We may never have a near-death experience, but moments that leave us speechless are the best moments when they cause us to do something important.

Listen to Jesus. That's the message that came to Peter and the others. And maybe in the end, that's what every message we get from such stunning moments is a variation of. Listen to God, listen to the ones God has put in front of you, pay attention to what's happening around you. Because the moment that's left you silent may just be the occasion for God turning you to go somewhere or do something different.

But listen.

Frederick Buechner says this about listening to God:

"The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak -- even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked 10 thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe there is a God who speaks at all anywhere.

"He speaks," Buechner says, "and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys. We cannot live our lives constantly looking back, listening back, lest we be turned to pillars of longing and regret; but to live without listening at all is to live deaf to the fullness of the music. Sometimes we avoid listening for fear of what we may hear, sometimes for fear that we may hear nothing at all but the empty rattle of our own feet on the pavement. "But be not afraid," he says, "for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him."

In the mundanity of walking from the house to the garage and in the stunning surprises that leave us speechless, there comes a mandated response: Listen. Listen for the voice of the sacred calling you to act.