

February 15, Transfiguration A (Matthew 17:1–9)

A new beginning was dawning. Would I lean in and listen?

by [Paul Lutter](#) in the [February 2026](#) issue

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Just under a year ago, I couldn't catch my breath. No, that's not quite right. I woke throughout the night because no matter what I tried, I couldn't force my body to breathe. The next morning, I still had trouble breathing. I looked in the mirror. The whole left side of my face drooped. I opened my mouth, and what little sound came out was slurred. Breathing wasn't my only problem; I also couldn't find the words I needed to tell my wife.

When I carefully made my way downstairs, I didn't have to say anything. She could easily see my shaky legs and lack of voice, and she grabbed her keys. I tried to make a joke as we headed out the door and to the hospital with what seemed to be a stroke. But my speech was slowed way down, and the worry she and I felt was way high. She offered a slight smile as she brought me to her car. She didn't say much, which worked out well since I couldn't say much. The closer we got to the hospital, the less I could say. The words I managed to find were a garbled word salad.

Eventually I was brought to the ICU and hooked up to an IV, heart monitor, and blood pressure cuff. They concluded that the stroke I'd had was also a heart attack. "Minor heart attack" was what they wrote in my chart. From where my body lay, it didn't feel minor. Though my mind and mouth weren't on speaking terms at the time, I now wondered whether the end was announcing its ill-timed arrival. My speech grew even slower. The few words I could utter sounded mumbled.

I make my way in the world with words. I worried that I would never again be able to speak. Who am I if I can no longer preach or write or think or read? I tried to tell those around me how I felt, yet my words were made even more confused by the tears that flooded over me.

A chaplain arrived and sat next to me. I tried to tell them how I felt, but the words were slow and impossible to understand. Thankfully my wife was beside me and translated for me. I don't remember how the chaplain responded. I do remember feeling comfort against an uncertain landscape. I felt heard and seen.

Some days later, I returned home. I still couldn't speak very well. It felt like a perpetual game of hide-and-seek: the words hid, and I would try to find them. Even if I found them, I had trouble saying them. And if I said them, were they the words I meant to say? I didn't know. Though words were a mystery to me, the tears that came over me in unexpected moments knew the way to find me.

Each day a gentle stream of friends and family came to see me. They'd bring a delicious meal and eat with me. They talked about their lives. They told funny stories and talked about the things they thought about. They'd ask how I felt and to let them know when I was tired. They talked about their plans for Christmas and the presents they had yet to buy. Family members helped me figure out the presents I still needed to get. Knowing I'd never had good manual dexterity, one of my sisters-in-law offered to wrap presents for me.

A friend drove me to a doctor's appointment and told me about how her husband and son were doing. Another good friend and his girlfriend arrived at our front door to help us put up and decorate our Christmas tree. Our daughter stood on a ladder as she placed the star on the top of the tree. I stood nearby, holding and being held by

that ladder.

They were all my speech therapy. I still struggled with words. But boy, could I listen. As the days unfolded, I came to anticipate their arrival. I listened for their cars in the driveway as I sat in a chair. Our puppy, just over one year old at the time, nestled in the crook of my arm and snored, no matter if there were other people sitting with me. Even though the world's rattle and hum continued outside our door, inside there was a space in which I could listen and could be heard.

Slowly, the words that had been hiding began to reveal themselves. I came to realize that the end I feared was not upon me. A new beginning was dawning. Would I lean in and listen to what was to come? Would I trust that when words hid, those whom I know and love would show up and help me find them? Would I continue to anticipate the ways grace would know and find me?