

Who Will You Listen To?

I want to start with a poem by Rev. Sarah Speed, called “Who Will You Listen To?”

Twitter or the BBC/ the ads on late-night television/ the wind as she blows/ the echo of children playing/ the quiet of snow/ the ice bucket challenge/ the phone when it rings/ your pastor/ your mother/ your doctor/ your gut/ the tension in your shoulders/ the restaurant singing happy birthday/ audio books/TED talks/ the rhythm of the music/ the coffee drip in the morning/ your therapist/ the wisdom of the enneagram/ the way your heart comes alive when you’re being creative/ the man on the corner asking for change/ the kid on the subway selling chocolate/ the labels on the makeup bottle that promise timeless beauty/ the magazines that tell you that you need timeless beauty/ astrology/ the Dow Jones/ the hiss of the radiator/ the pitter patter of little feet/ financial advisors/ the top 40 pop/ the top 40 country/ the New York Times/ the rumor mill/ The book of Psalms/ your sense of self/ Jesus when he says, “I am with you, always.”

That’s a good question as we start our Lenten series on “Seeking.” Who will you listen to?

This Lenten series is founded on questions. Many questions are restorative like “Can these bones live?” Some feel like a charge or challenge, as in today’s Who will you listen to? Some questions are hopeful and curious, How can we begin again? These questions won’t necessarily lead to answers, but they can help us find clarity and a new perspective.

In order to engage in the spiritual practice of seeking, we must maintain a posture of listening, staying open and curious, instead of callous and closed off. That’s hard to do in this world where people expect you to pick a side, choose a team, and you better be able to defend why you have chosen what you have chosen. So hopefully, as we enter the sanctuary, we can put all of that aside and begin to listen, with no pre-conceived notions or shutting our ears because we’ve heard that story before. Enter with expectation and curiosity.

In our scripture for this morning, we see two different examples of listening. First, Adam and Eve who allow the snake’s manipulative voice to become louder than God’s voice.

Let's dive into that story for a minute. We have all heard the story before. In her commentary on Genesis 2, Rev. Danielle Shroyer says that in the ancient world, snakes were a symbol of transformation. Their venom held the possibility of both poison and medicine. Our human story she says begins in the crux of this same paradox of possibility as the first humans embark into the fertile field God had prepared for them.

“God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened,” the serpent says. And while the serpent didn't lie – indeed their eyes did open – as it often goes with crafty tricksters, that isn't the whole story. Because while the humans wouldn't physically die as they imagined, God also told the truth. A death did happen. It was the death of their innocence.

Before we can embark on a life of wisdom – one that requires us to choose, over and over again, between using our words and actions as poison or medicine – we must allow our naïve innocence to die. This call to grow up and leave our Divine Parent's house comes for all of us. It is painful and yet it is necessary.

Has that ever happened to you? It has to me. I mean, I grew up with Bible Club happening after school. They had the felt boards, they had the scriptures to memorize and I thought I knew who Jesus was. And then when I headed from Berkley: First UMC, a pretty progressive church to Big Beaver UMC, a more traditional church, I began to hear about a different God. One that wasn't so interested in the world out there, but the spiritual life of the individual. And there was a lot of talk about who gets to be in the church and who better repent before they enter the doors of the sanctuary. Any of you ever attended a church like that?

And it flowed into when I went to Asbury College and Asbury Seminary. I heard the “right” interpretation of scripture concerning many, many things that somehow didn't strike me as true. I kept seeing a little bit of gray and was being shut down whenever I asked questions.

I began to stop listening to the voice of God and started listening to the voice of someone else's perspective. It was easy for me to come home and then tell my gay friends, that it says right in the Bible that they need to repent because they are an abomination. I used my words for poison and not for medicine.

Look at our art work on the front of your bulletin today. The art on the left is entitled “Who will You Listen to? Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman reflects on the ways the doctrine of original sin caused harm in her faith journey. She says “Beware of the ways deeply rooted, harmful theology bubbles up in your life. In this case, for me it surfaced as thoughts of shame, self blame, self-distrust, self-deprecation, and self-hatred. Ask yourself, “Who will I listen to?” I was giving power to a hermeneutic that wasn’t even in line with who God has revealed God’s self to be, and the image of God that I bear.”

She says about her piece of art, “I decided to create this piece in monochromatic cool tones, contrasting with the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (in orange) and God’s wisdom (in gold) surrounding them. In hindsight, I realize I was visualizing my emotional journey with the Genesis text. The cool tones represent the heaviness and confusion I felt with this familiar story and the high contrast mimics the way this text has made me feel separate and isolated from God. The woman’s expression holds the weight and the pain caused by the way this text has been used to subjugate women and to prop up destructive doctrines and a distorted gospel.

Sometimes we wrestle with our theology and with scripture and sometimes we need to ask ourselves, who are we listening to? Those voices that try to sway us to their belief systems or those voices that encourage us to dig deep, to read commentaries, and study the scripture. Not just looking at a few verses and saying that is truth, but looking at who the audience was, and when it was written and what those ancient texts could possibly be telling us today.

Jesus has the same dilemma in his temptation. I think the really interesting part of this scripture in Matthew that almost always gets lost is that it says that “The Spirit led Jesus in to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” That seems odd doesn’t it, that the Holy Spirit of God would lead Jesus to be tempted? All three gospel accounts have this story at the very outset of Jesus’ active ministry. And as I thought about it, I realized that this little detail is not incidental but important. Because if Jesus is going to respond to God’s call and accept his vocation, he needs to sort out what kind of ministry he is going to have.

So in our gospel lesson, Jesus had to face the temptation to listen to other voices and respond to other claims on him rather than to listen to the voice and claims of God. And the story reminds everyone who would follow Jesus that vocation and temptation go together, that who God calls us to be is always questioned by other voices, both those outside us and those within us.

Let's look at the idea of vocation for a minute. The word "vocation" comes from the Latin verb "vocare", to call, which is closely related to the Latin noun "vox" voice. In our time, vocation has come to mean a job or a calling, but it is a bigger idea than that. Vocation means deciding who you are going to be and what you are going to do, in response to the God who loves you and calls you by name.

So temptation is about whose voice do you listen to? In the TV cartoons of my youth, temptation was often depicted as an angel on one shoulder whispering in one ear for the hero to do good, and a devil on the other shoulder whispering in the other ear for the hero to do evil. Which voice would the hero listen to?

Of course, real temptation is more than a cartoon, and it is not about some guy in a red suit with horns and a tail but it *is* about which voice to listen to.

Temptation is about your identity. It's about who you are going to choose to be. In the cartoons the conflict is always cast between good and evil; more precisely the conflict is between vocation and self deception.

And so Jesus has a choice. Will he use what he has for medicine or poison? Rev. Danielle Shroyer again says "Will he use his gifts as a parlor trick or a sacred balm? Will he use his glory for fame or for peace? Will he use his power for domination or for justice? Jesus shows us the way by choosing medicine, every time.

And as he does so, he teaches us what we all need to know as we fumble toward wisdom. When he refuses to turn bread into stone, it's because he knows his gifts and abilities are in service for something far greater than hunger. When he refuses to test God, it's because he already trusts God. And when he refuses the kind of loyalty that leads to worldly authority, it's because he knows power is meant for connection and not domination.

And he knows all of this because he has been listening. Day after day, he dwells with his Divine Parent. He embodies the teachings he has received in the Temple, on his mother's lap, in his father's shop. Jesus shows us what it looks like to walk in wisdom, to become adept at parsing out the many voices that call for our allegiance.

That's temptation. It's those other voices telling you something different than God has already told you. We have to listen to the voice of God at our center. This voice tell us above all and after it all, we are God's beloved. And when we know this, we can filter out so much of those other voices vying for our attention.

If we start at the voice of God first, the other voices begin to fade away.

in 1797, In Ulster County, New York, Isabella Baumfree was born to Elizabeth and James Baumfree, slaves to Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh. Isabella was one of 13 children. Isabella grew up speaking only Dutch until the age of nine when she was sold to a new master, John Neely.

John and his family only spoke English and frequently beat Isabella because of miscommunications. It was during this time that Isabella began her spiritual journey. Religion turned into her refuge. Isabella would have conversations with God in the woods and prayed aloud during times of hardship. She was sold twice more, eventually ending up as a slave to John Dumont of West Park, New York.

Isabella would later describe her treatment at the hands of John Dumont as "cruel and harsh." In 1815, Isabella fell in love with a slave from another farm named Robert. The two had a daughter together, however, Robert's master forbade the relationship and the two never saw each other again. Dumont later forced Isabella to marry an older slave named Thomas. Together, they had four children, one of which died.

In 1799, New York began negotiations to abolish slavery. The emancipation date was set for July 4, 1827. Dumont made a deal with Isabella. "If she would do well and be faithful," he would release her one year early. Dumont did not hold up his end of the deal, claiming a hand injury made Isabella unproductive. She continued working for him until she felt she had satisfied her obligation to him. She then left

with her infant daughter. She explained, “I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right.”

Life remained hard for her. She was given refuge at a house of Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen. They defended her from Dumont when he tried to bring her back. Shortly thereafter, Isabella learned that her five year old son, Peter had been illegally sold to a farmer in Alabama. With the help of Quaker activists, Isabella was able to go to court and have Peter returned to her. This was one of the first times in which a black woman successfully challenged a white man in the United States court.

Isabella had a life changing religious experience during her time with the Van Wagenens. Isabella was tempted to return to Dumont. She was listening to other voices and not the voice of God. But during that temptation, she felt “baptized in the Holy Spirit” and “overwhelmed with the greatness of the Divine presence.” This enabled her to resist the temptation.

Shortly thereafter, she moved to New York City and became known for her speaking ability. She became an advocate for women’s rights and abolitionists.

On June 1, 1843, Isabella changed her name to the one we know her by today: Sojourner Truth. She explained her new name “The Spirit calls me east and I must go.” Sojourn means to stay temporarily or to seek. Isabella, now Sojourner Truth, saw herself as a seeker of truth.

During her temptation, she heard the voice of God above all the other voices, calling her to a new vocation and with that a new name.

Let’s look at our other art for today. It’s entitled Turn In by Lisle Gwynn Garrity.

She says” In this image, the words of the Tempter hover in the background. The Tempter’s voice lingers like a ringing in Jesus’ ears saying, “Take charge. Hoard your power. Dominate. Control.”

Somehow, Jesus has deciphered that these words are simply background noise. He closes his eyes and goes inward, wrapping himself in a posture of self embrace. From this introspective perspective, Jesus essentially says, “Get behind me, Satan.”

The back drop of this piece resembles the dust of the desert. Like sand washing along a beach, the sediment shifts into water in the top left, hinting at what bolsters Jesus in his ministry: his belonging to God. His belovedness washes over him, giving him the courage to defy the deception of the Tempter and tune into his inner wisdom. In this way, he is given a new song to carry with him, a lullaby from God that goes, “You, my child, in you, I am well pleased.” This is a melody for singing, a song for dancing.

What are the voices that linger with you like a ringing in your ears? What are the messages that try to deceive or devour you? Let those voices buzz and fade into the background. Close your eyes, tune in and embrace yourself. From your belovedness, what song will you sing?

As we begin this Lenten Journey, consider what voices might be pulling you toward more poison than medicine. Carve out time for silence, that still small voice of God may come into fuller focus. Listen for God, who is always there, right at the center of your heart, inviting you into a life of belovedness even as you travel east of Eden.

I want to close with the words from a song by Lauren Daigel. I hope they will help you when you begin to hear those voices that are other than the voice of God.’

I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I’m not enough
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up.

Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low.
Remind me once again just who I am because I need to know.

You say I am loved when I can’t feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
And you say I am held when I am falling short
And when I don’t belong, Of you say I am yours.
And I believe, Oh I believe, what you say of me, I believe.

The only thing that matters now is everything you think of me.
In you I find my worth, In you I find my identity.

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
And you say I am held when I am falling short
When I don't belong, Oh You say I am yours,
And I believe. What you say of me. I believe.

Amen.