

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 ~ Matthew 4:1-11

*Seeking: who will you listen to?*<sup>i</sup>

First Sunday in Lent ~ February 26, 2023

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*Sermon:*

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 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 way your heart comes alive when you're being creative/the labels on the makeup bottle that promise timeless beauty/ 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."*<sup>iii</sup> This poem, written by Sarah A. Speed, leads us into the question at the heart of both scripture lessons and my sermon today. Who will you listen to?

Who was Eve listening to? We will get to Jesus in the wilderness, but let's start with Eve in the garden of Eden. As the story goes, Eve had not even been created yet, when God commanded Adam, telling him: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." With the two "shall's" in that sentence, this is clearly the language of command. But then when Eve was relaying this command to the serpent, she changed it up. Just a bit. She told the serpent, "God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree...nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" Just *touching* it would kill them? How did that slip into God's command? We will never know. Did she mishear Adam, or misremember what he said? Did Adam mishear, or choose to add this spin when relaying God's command to Eve? Or was she improvising in the heat of the moment, perhaps adding her own touch for dramatic effect with the serpent?

We will never know. But I love this slippage. I love this unanswerable question, because it speaks to the challenge of communication, especially the challenge of listening and being heard, the challenge of interpretation and the potential of "spin" that began with our pre-historic myth of the first two human beings. It points to the ambiguities, the missteps, the unavoidable slippages that occur whenever one speaks and the other listens. Today's story is the older of our two creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, written down about 900 BCE. And yet it still shimmers with a message we need to hear and learn from in 2023. Wisdom and truth that can help us better understand ourselves as God's beloved children.

However first, I must address the theological baggage most of us carry around about the story of Adam and Eve. Baggage that is *not* actually in the story. Over the last 2900 years or so, it has been forced to say things it does not actually say. If you look carefully at this story, *nowhere* will you find the words "sin," or "devil" or "fall." And yet, it has been used to answer questions like how sin entered the world, where death came from, or why people sin. These are not the questions that this story is trying to answer. Nevertheless, this story has been used to create

harmful theology that has clobbered all people, especially women. And continues to do so, to this day.

Genesis 3 does twist and turn around the character of the crafty, talkative serpent who is going to offer us a lesson and lead us to Jesus in the wilderness. In a moment. First, we're going to talk about snakes. We are familiar with the snake circling the staff of Asclepius, found in the logo of the American Medical Association, the American Veterinary Association, and of many medical schools. African and Norse mythologies regard the snake similarly. Snakes are regarded as guardians of sacred places in Hinduism and Buddhism. The ancient Greeks believed that the snakes' venom held the possibility of both poison *and* medicine. In the ancient world, snakes were a symbol of transformation. The symbolism is related to the shedding process of the snake, which makes them look new again. They continue to shed their old skin and get new skin not just when they are baby snakes as they grow into their full stature of snake hood, but throughout their lives.

Sounds a little like our Christian understanding of transformation, yes? Like Jesus saying, "See, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5); or like Paul saying, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). As creepy as we may regard snakes, they can help us out here. I invite us to shed these skins, the layers of guilt, the weight of terms like "original sin" and "fall" that bind and distort this story. Instead let's focus in on this core question: Given the presence of doubt (which the serpent introduced), and our loss of innocence and naivete (which is what *did* die, Adam and Eve did not die after eating the fruit), the important question is this: "Who will you listen to?"

After forty days of fasting in the wilderness, not far from the river Jordan, Jesus was tempted by the devil. Yes, in this story we do have the "devil" who is also called the "tempter." Like the snake in Genesis, introducing doubt and spin to Eve and Adam, the devil tries to coerce Jesus, by taking truth that Jesus knows (in scripture) and twisting, turning it, just a bit. Freshly baptized Jesus has a huge job to do. Can you imagine the job description: "Save the world." Where to begin. Why not start with a big splash. Get everyone's attention. The devil wasn't suggesting to Jesus to commit a crime or break an obvious law. What is so compelling in both of these core stories of our tradition is how subtle the voice of doubt, of testing limits really is. Thanks be to God; Jesus knew how to listen to the voice of God above all others. Jesus was tuned in to God, even while under the extreme stress and fatigue of near starvation and loneliness.

The devil's phrase, "If you are the Son of God" should really be translated as "*Since* you are the Son of God..." The devil isn't asking Jesus to prove who he is – the devil is trying to provoke Jesus to misuse the power the devil *knows* that Jesus has. Can he tempt Jesus to use his gifts to be performative, to be spectacular? Jesus said, "no." Jesus taught us that following God's way is actually the *opposite* of performative. He preached this and modeled throughout his life on earth. In spite of our tendency towards performative spirituality and performative worship. Jesus chose to show up rather than to show off. Jesus chose the healing path rather than the poisonous one. Again, and again.

What about us? We too can use our words as poison or as medicine. The line between good and evil, harm and help, can be razor thin. And who we really listen to makes all the difference. That's what is so compelling and ingenious in both of these stories. Are the voices you are listening to, pulling you more toward poison than medicine? Can we shed the skin of envy and comparison? The serpent in the garden with Adam and Eve; and the devil in the desert with Jesus, both know what they are doing. They were tempting Eve and Jesus to think things could better. The tempting voice that keeps saying to us: "You could *know* more, you could *do* more. You *know* you want to..."

As far away as we are from the mythical Garden of Eden and the wilderness beyond the river Jordan: Who among us hasn't gone down that path? "If only... if only I was ten pounds lighter, if only my house was bigger or smaller or better organized, if only I lived in a bigger city or a smaller city, had a more important job. If things were just a little different, then my life would be shinier, better, blessed, whole, complete." And these days with social media we are drowning in comparison. It's become so easy for us to see glimpses of other people's lives on social media and find ours lacking, insufficient, dull. "If you're still casting about trying to figure out what to give up for Lent: how about trying to give up envy and comparison?"

Who in your family do you really listen to for advice and wisdom? The joke in my family is about the way I listen to my oldest sister, Wendy, as an ultimate authority in my life. She was the first born in our family with four children, I the fourth child, (Like Elliot Johnson, Jude Kaiser, and now Leon Kowalski!). In my family I was the caboose, aka "Little Laur." My big big sister, Wendy, seven years older than I, was and still is, very cool. Born in 1949, she was a teen in the 1960's: a questioner of givens, creative, inventive, artistic. One quick example: my mom taught me how to sew step-by-step using Simplicity and Butterick sewing patterns to the Tee. Cut every notch, follow every direction without deviation. Then Wendy waltzes in on me cutting out a skirt one day and says, you don't need to cut those notches. And you can skip half of those directions if you want." (She could design and sew a garment without a pattern at that point.) Even though she was the oldest, she was never bossy. Nevertheless, Wendy's opinions and ideas are ones I've always listened to: wisdom from on high. My husband, Bob, and our two adult daughters still love to tease me. If they are trying to convince me to do something about which I am reluctant or resistant they will pull out the ultimate, "Wendy said...."

Here is a prayer for us to our God who in Christ has already been wherever we are right now. No matter how lost or low we feel, no matter how heavily burdened we are by grief or pain. No matter how confused and conflicted we feel by hard choices with no obvious or simple path forward. Jesus has been there already. Jesus said, I am always with you. True to his word, Jesus is with us, right now. To bring this sermon home, I am going to lead us in a prayer by Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. It is titled, "*For courage when you thought things would be different by now.*" Let us pray:

*"God, I thought I would feel different by now, but new pressures just keep mounting. I have been struggling for too long to meet each new challenge, to scrape up resources, to find small comforts, to change strategies, to dig deep into our reserves, to stay positive, but I need relief and fresh hope and a minute to just say, I really wish things were easier. Just when we thought we could almost be done with this, another shoe drops. There are no finish lines. We long for the simple joys of times past, those everyday pleasures we can barely remember but still hunger for. A great night's sleep. Less financial stress. The ease of making future plans. The wish that our faith would give us an exemption from all that is too painful.*

*Blessed are we who look to you, God, in the midst of troubles that are too great for us, that have gone on far too long. Blessed are we how choose to listen to your Voice above all others. We, who dare to say, now would be a good time for help to come, for this to be over, once and for all. God, send us help. Bring solutions for the desperate, protection for the vulnerable, comfort for the suffering, strength to the caregivers, wisdom to those in charge. Infuse us with the courage to suffer with hope. That our suffering doesn't go unnoticed by you. Sustain us and orient us to the reality in which we now live. Help us pace ourselves. Attune our ears to your voice above all others. Keep us awake, bind us together, engage our hearts and minds to what might be done, right now."<sup>iv</sup>*

As Ralph Waldo Emerson has written, "Let us be silent so we may hear the whisper of God." To help us listen more intentionally to the voice, the whisper of God, for the six Sundays in Lent, beginning today, we will extend our weekly, "Time for Silent Prayer and Reflection" to 90 seconds. Yes, we can do this, beloved Presbyterian community! As usual the beginning and the end of this lengthened time for silent prayer and reflection will be indicated by the tone chime—one to begin, and two chimes to end.

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<sup>i</sup> The title and sermon themes for this series, *Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith*. A series created for Lent-Easter Year A, are from A Sanctified Art, LLC.

<sup>ii</sup> From Rev. Sarah A. Speed's poem, "who will you listen to?" *Sanctified Art "Seeking" Lenten Devotion*, p.5.

<sup>iii</sup> Amy Miracle, "Shiny Enough: Facing Envy," *Journal for Preacher*, Lent 2023, p. 29.

<sup>iv</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*, (Convergent Books: New York, NY, 2023), pp. 146-147, excerpts.