

Who Will You Listen To? – Matthew 4:1-11, Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

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Our theme for Lent this year is seeking. And we will highlight an important way by which we seek a deeper faith in God: asking questions.

Each week, we will focus on a question that allows us as both individual children of God and as the church to grow closer to God and, maybe more importantly, to be more like the people God intends us to be.

There is a Lenten devotional around this theme of seeking that is available to you. You may access it online on any device. The address is listed in your bulletin. And for those of you who don't do devices, we'd be happy to print a copy for you.

Also, there is artwork that accompanies each week's theme. Up here next to me will be the painting for the week. It will also be in the narthex along with a statement on the work by the artist. And, throughout the entire season, you can stop and look at the art and read all the descriptions in the connector as they are unveiled each week.

This morning's question is simple but not easy to answer: Who will you listen to?

"To engage in the spiritual practice of seeking, we must maintain a posture of listening, staying open and curious instead of calloused and closed off. In the Old and New Testament readings today, we see two different examples of listening. Seeking the fruit of the garden, Adam and Eve allow the snake's manipulative voice to become louder than God's voice.

"In the wilderness, Jesus defies the deception of the tempter by listening intuitively—to God, to his inner moral compass, to the teachings of his faith. And so, who will you listen to? What sources do you seek for news, information, and media? Whose voices—and what messages—take up too much space in your head? From the onslaught of messaging we receive, we are invited to choose carefully. Faith practices can help us listen and filter what we're hearing to discern God's voice." (Rev. Lisa Gynn Garrity, Sanctified Art)

In commenting on these texts, Rev. Danielle Shroyer writes that “if we are to be like Jesus [refusing to give into the temptations of the devil in Matthew 4], we also must begin by first listening to the voice of God at our center. This voice tells us, above all and after it all, we are God’s Beloved. When we know this, we filter out so much of the silt and grit that traps us. Consider,” she says, “what voices might be pulling you toward more poison than medicine.”

I have been praying all week whether to go where I’m going to go. And the reason for my reluctance is that I’ve always tried to steer clear of issues that would divide us. Instead, I look for the common ground we share that can further unite us in our common calling to be God’s people.

The issue I’ve decided to reference today is one of those examples of how just mentioning it in this forum runs the risk of alienating some of you. And yet, I think what I’m about to share is spot-on when it comes to the importance of who you’re listening to.

Full disclosure: When I watch cable news (and I don’t watch a lot of it), I tend to watch Fox News. And what I watch is usually their hard news shows. I tend to shy away from the opinion programming. And that’s basically because I can tell you what the opinion hosts are going to say before they even say. I could probably do the same thing if I tuned into CNN or MSNBC and started to listen to their opinion shows.

I tell you this in case some of you who like Fox may think that I’m only bashing Fox by bringing up this story. It’s not my intent to bash or endorse any particular outlet.

So here goes. It was revealed this week from a batch of recently disclosed text messages and emails that Fox’s three main prime-time hosts—Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and Laura Ingraham—did not actually believe some of the pro-Trump, election-fraud conspiracy theories and theorists they were putting on the air in the aftermath of the 2020 election. In fact, the emails and messages reveal they didn’t believe any of those conspiracy theories.

They revealed that the hosts and others at Fox privately made fun of, and were at times appalled by, election-fraud claims of Donald Trump advisors. But they mostly kept their skepticism hidden from viewers. And

that's because they knew their Fox audience was largely endorsers of such election claims and feared they would lose viewers if they stopped.

The emails and messages were released from discovery and deposition contained in a recently released legal filing in Delaware state court by Dominion Voting systems, which many on the Trump team had alleged to have helped rig the 2020 election.

Now, I would not be surprised if CNN or MSNBC hosts did the very same thing on their networks (hiding their personal views in exchange for proclaiming positions that were in line with those of their viewers) in order to maintain or increase viewership. After all, these networks are businesses that depend on viewership to sustain and maximize profit.

And frankly, there's certainly nothing illegal or maybe even unethical about the practice.

However, this reality does force us to seriously take into consideration who we're listening to and what their motives are. And, to contemplate with great scrutiny what is right, truthful, and in line with our values.

We must take scrutinizing to a high level when it comes to the voices we hear. Because not all voices can be trusted.

A therapist once boldly proclaimed to me in one of my sessions with him that I needed, ultimately, to decide what was true for me. Truth is not dictated by everybody else. Yes, we can listen. But we must be discriminating when it comes to deciding which voices are most reflective of what is true.

When it comes to faith, there is no bigger responsibility we have than determining which voices bring us truth for the journey of walking with God and being the person or people God is calling us to be.

One of the paintings for our theme this week is also titled, "Who Will You Listen To?" In her artist statement, Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman reflects on the ways the doctrine of original sin caused her harm in her faith journey: "Beware," she said, "of the ways deeply-rooted, harmful theology bubbles up in your life. In this case, for me it started 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 an [understanding] that

wasn't even in line with who God has revealed God's self to be, and the image of God that I bear."

It's interesting that in the gospel lesson from Matthew, the tempter uses scripture to coerce Jesus. At the pinnacle of the temple in the holy city, the devil said, "If you're the son of God, throw yourself down. It is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus responds with, "It is *also* written...Do not put the Lord your God to the test." He counters the tempter with his own words of scripture that model expansive faith and trust in God.

Indeed, there are religious voices or doctrinal teachings that intentionally or unintentionally do us harm rather than lead us closer to God. And we can have the courage to call it what it is: unhelpful, unloving, or even untrue to God's identity and the ideals God has set forth for us.

The voices I have listened to or do listen to today don't resonate with me due to their certainty. I don't search out voices that will tell me all the answers. Instead, I seek out the voices that speak wisdom with a distinct humility and compassion—voices that give good counsel without telling me what to believe, voices that grant me the room to make judgments for myself about what is true.

On the top of that mountain, amid Jesus' transfiguration, the voice from the cloud bellowed, "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him!"

As you attempt to answer this question, "Who will you listen to?", consider the voice of Jesus. Read what he said in the gospels. Ponder how those words resonate with you. Listen for his inclusivity, for his compassion, for his determination to be faithful, for his willingness to go to the cross in loving sacrifice for the world. Is that a voice worth listening to?

Each of us as followers should make that judgment for ourselves. It's a good bet that in him we will find something we like and something that is true.