

# Seeking: Who Will You Listen To?

## First Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:1-11    Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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What are you seeking? What is God seeking? These are the overarching questions we'll be exploring and reflecting upon throughout this season of Lent. *Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith* will be the guiding Lenten resource, from A Sanctified Art, I'll be using this year. Over the next several Sundays, following the assigned lectionary scripture passages from both the Old and New Testaments, **we will encounter people who are seeking**. Each is seeking a new beginning, a different life, a deeper faith. What unfolds is an exchange filled with questions and exploration. In the process, assumptions are disrupted, a new perspective is revealed, and mystery grows.

As we've come to realize, from a progressive perspective, not all their questions, nor all your and my questions, will necessarily lead to answers. And rarely will they be easy answers. Those questions will, however, help us find some clarity and a new perspective, hopefully leading us to a new beginning, a restoration, and a wider grace.

**I encourage each of us to engage seeking as a spiritual practice. So, in a posture of listening, stay curious and open.** It is the hope of the those who prepared this resource, and my own hope, that the questions that arise will create a safe space to explore, thus drawing us closer to God and to one another. The quest of seeking necessarily means that we be open and honest in our questioning, our doubts, our fears, our confusion, our discoveries – and in that process, unveiling a more authentic, rooted and grounded faith. Remember, **having doubts is not the opposite of having faith. Rather, our doubts can lead us into a journey of exploration and deeper faith.** The **Rev. Sarah A. Speed**, who is the author of the worship liturgy we will be using throughout this season of Lent, writes:

**For me, faith has always been an experience of seeking** – seeking God in the world, seeking the good, seeking a deeper truth. I seek my way through prayer. I seek my way into scripture. I am forever cobbling together memories, feelings, questions, and experiences, all in an effort to see God more clearly.

**So may we be seekers.** May we ask questions. May we look for God under every rock and stone. And in the seeking, may we find.

Here at College Hill, engaging a progressive approach to a life and journey of faith, **we put on emphasis on seeking and asking good questions rather than settling for inadequate easy answers, which much of organized religion is so fond of providing. Questions, after all, are a sign of growth, curiosity, and wonder. Questioning is a sign of a living faith.**

Turning now to the Old and New Testament scripture readings for this week, the resource material makes the connection with the theme of seeking this way. "In our focal texts for this week, 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."

**The story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is meant to heighten our own awareness of, our attachment to, and our dependence on things *other than* God. The wilderness signifies any place where our core commitments, priorities, trust, loyalties, and very identity will be tested.**

The resource material continues, "**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."

The **Rev. Danielle Shroyer**, as resource biblical commentator this week, provide the following very helpful information for us to consider.

**In the ancient world, snakes were a symbol of transformation. Their venom held the possibility of both poison and medicine.** Our human story 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 would 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 naive innocence to die. This call to grow up...comes for all of us. It is painful, and yet it is necessary.

Many years later, this same choice comes to Jesus as he wanders the wilderness. 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, [not the tempter's poison] every time...**

When he refuses to turn bread into stone, it's because he knows his gifts and abilities are in service to 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.

Jesus knows all of this because he has been listening... 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. [For example, the voices calling for political allegiance and unwavering loyalty is deafening.]

If we are to be like Jesus, 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 [-that's our identity]. When we know this, we filter out so much of the silt and grit that traps us.** We release ourselves into the arms of love. We make space for the work of transformation to be born in us.

**As you [and I] begin this Lenten journey, consider what voices might be pulling you toward more poison than medicine.** Carve out time for silence, that the 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."

**Who will you listen to? I stand here this day to acknowledge, yes heretically, that throughout the ages the voice of the Church, organized religion, has often been a voice of poison, not medicine.** Some of the officially sanctioned orthodox teachings of the Church have caused more damage and harm than good. The **Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman**, who drew the logo on the bulletin cover for this Lenten resource, reflects on the ways, for example, **the doctrine of original sin caused harm in her faith journey.** I think we all will be able to find points of connection with her story. She writes:

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

Please note that similarly, the tempter also tries to use scripture to coerce Jesus. Our sub-theme this week of who do we listen to invites us to **consider when we have listened to religious voices or doctrinal teachings that have caused harm. When have you given power to beliefs that do not reflect the love of God? How do you discern—as in, tell the difference between—harmful and benevolent theology?**

What additional questions do the stories of Adam and Eve in the garden, and Jesus' temptation in the wilderness bubble up to the surface for you? These questions, and so many others, are **honest questions for deeper faith.**

Welcome to the season of Lent.

Amen.

Resources:

"Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith", A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide, 2023.