

LISTENING IN THE LAND OF COMPETING VOICES

GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7; MATTHEW 4:1-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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We live in a land of many voices.

This is perhaps true of our day in a way it has not been in any other generation, if only for the sheer *volume* of voices that we must process on a daily basis.

As we noted in our Epiphany sermon series on the Psalms and seeking a well-lived life, twenty-first century life is one where so many people feel pushed and pulled in so many different directions.

It has become something of a cliché to say that ours may be the most distracted generation in history.

We process innumerable modes of communication:

- Email
- Social media
- Text messages
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Blogs
- Online news sources
- Even the old-fashioned *telephone* or hand-written *letters* from time to time!

Many of us spend a good chunk of each day sifting through a mountain of communication from all these diverse modes.

And in this ocean of communication there are so many people and organizations competing for our attention.

Marketers, politicians, community groups, fundraisers, newspapers, magazines, television programs, entertainers, *preachers*. So many voices clamouring for our attention, trying to convince us... *listen to me... buy what I'm selling... vote for me... sign up for this... support my cause... try this... you won't regret it... you deserve to be happy!*

And it's bad enough having to sort out all the voices *out there* in the world. What about the voices in our own heads?

The classic image of the devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other is a bit simplistic, to be sure, but it does express something of the truth.

Sometimes we don't need *outside* voices to steer us toward bad or harmful choices; often we can be our own worst enemies. *It's ok. God wants you to be happy, right? It won't really make much of a difference anyway. God is gracious, isn't he?*

Voices within and voices without. So many voices.

How do we decide which voices to ignore and which to pay attention to?

On this first Sunday of Lent our texts have to do with temptation, with choosing between competing voices.

Wouldn't it be great if there was only one voice?

I was thinking yesterday about where I might turn for an analogy or example for this sermon. I thought about Dostoevsky's famous novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* and its famous "Grand Inquisitor" scene, which deals with the temptation of Christ and Jesus' stubborn refusal to take an easier road.

I decided to choose a different example from the world of high culture ☺.

On Friday night, Naomi and I went with Nicholas to see "The Lego Movie" (Claire was at a sleepover).

Lego land is ruled by the evil "Lord Business" whose main priority is that everything *should stay in order*.

The main character is Emmett Brickowski, a Lego construction worker. He's an ordinary guy with a very simple life. Every day he gets up and follows instructions. All of his life is programmed for him according to a series of easily understood and easy to follow steps.

Do this. Don't do that. Go here. Don't go there. Listen to this. Don't listen to that.

Lord Business has control over every aspect of Lego land. He makes the rules and reinforces them through domination of the media and a whole host of other incentives to get people to behave. If anyone should get out of line, Lord Business' henchman Bad Cop will take care of them!

There is only one voice to listen to.

(Until a few people stop listening... But I don't want to spoil the movie for you ☺.)

Many people would prefer this kind of a world. One voice. Just listen and obey.

Our first text from Genesis get us close to this kind of a scenario.

There is God, a garden, two human beings. And a simple command. Don't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Simple, right? Just follow the instructions. One voice—and a voice that actually, *unlike* Lord Business, has your best in mind!

Well, we know that it's not that simple.

We know that another voice—a serpent—arrives on the scene.

(The question of what the serpent was doing in God's good world is an old and mysterious one, and we'll leave it aside for today – the short answer is “we're not told.”)

The serpent begins to plant some questions in the minds of Adam and Eve, all centered around this one question: “Did God really say...?”

The serpent plants these little seeds of doubt about the truthfulness and reliability of God. God's authority to determine the shape of reality is challenged.

And this opening of the door, this challenging of the order and structure that God had instituted in creation leads to the disastrous climax of Genesis 3 that we are all familiar with.

The first humans give in to temptation and sin enters the world.

They were not content to be image-bearers; they wanted to be “like God” in a way that they were never intended to be.

The serpent was correct, in a sense, for Adam and Eve’s eyes *were* opened, and they *did* know good and evil, but they knew it from the irreversible perspective of having *chosen* evil over good.

It’s easy to read Genesis 3 as the story of how Adam and Eve ruined things for the rest of us. When I was a kid (hoeing weeds in the field on a hot day, no doubt) I certainly thought of it this way. *They* were to blame for my misery – if only *they* hadn’t taken the miserable fruit, we’d all have lived blissfully ever after.

As far as explanations go, this one had a certain tidy simplistic plausibility to it and it had the happy consequence of taking the focus off of me!

But Genesis 3 was not written so that we would have someone to blame for our predicament. Genesis 3 explains our world but it also gives us a lens through which to examine ourselves.

What we see is that we’re not very different than Adam and Eve. We all share their instinct to rise up against prohibitions. If something is painted in a negative context we seem to be magnetically drawn to it. We tend to chafe under authority of any kind, and crave the autonomy to be and do what we want.

We think things would be easier with only one voice, but often it seems that the only voice we really want to listen to is our own

In Matthew 4, we see another human being faced with competing voices.

Let’s set the scene. Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan river as a public identification as God’s beloved son, and as a form of identification with human beings.

Jesus is led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. There, for forty days, he eats nothing and is tempted by the devil. At the end of these forty days, the devil offers Jesus three famous temptations.

1. Turn these stones into bread!
2. Bow down and worship me and I will give you authority over all the earth!
3. Throw yourself down from the temple and demonstrate that you are the son of God

Jesus resists all three temptations and returns, filled with the power of the Spirit, to Galilee to begin his public ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

But as is so often the case, the first hearers/readers of this story would have heard all kinds of echoes from earlier parts of the biblical narrative. They would have made connections that perhaps aren't as obvious to us.

The first readers would have heard echoes of Genesis 3 in this story. They would have remembered the serpent saying to Adam and Eve... "Go on, choose your own way... It's OK... God can't be trusted... He doesn't want your eyes to be opened so that you will see good and evil as he does..."

They would also have heard echoes of the wilderness and the exodus from Egypt.

They would have instantly made the connection between Jesus' forty *days* in the wilderness and Israel's forty *years* in the wilderness, Moses' forty days on the mountain, etc.

For Israel, the wilderness in between Egypt and Canaan was a time of testing, a time when they frequently stumbled and failed, grumbling against the Lord (for lack of bread!), fashioning idols, and failing to trust in the future God was preparing for them.

If this connection between Jesus' temptation and the story of Israel were not obvious enough, Jesus' usage of the Hebrew Scriptures would have driven the point home.

In resisting each of the three temptations, Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy—the book of the OT where Israel was tested by God in the desert.

The two-fold point would have been clear enough.

Jesus was faithful where Adam was not, resisting the temptations of the devil where the first humans had given in (a point Paul brings this out more fully in Romans 5).

Jesus was faithful where Israel was not, persevering through the harshness, the loneliness, and the struggle of the wilderness without giving into grumbling and idolatry.

Jesus is re-presenting the story from creation and fall to Israel and exile—in a sense, undoing the tragedy of human sin and folly. And, as the new Adam, the new Israel, the truest expression of what humanity was meant to *be* and to *do*, he is redeeming and reclaiming all of the human story and launching it into a new way forward.

One of this week's lectionary texts that we didn't read this morning comes from Romans 5, where Paul says in verse 19:

For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Jesus does what Adam and Eve did not do. Jesus does what Israel was never able to do consistently. He resists temptation; he refuses to believe the lies about God and himself; he listens to the right voice.

What can we learn from our texts about how to listen in the land of competing voices?

I often like to think about a sermon or a text in terms of two questions.

- What is the truth about us?
- What is the truth about God?

Let's start with the truth about us. The truth about us is that we are prone to wander. We listen to the wrong voices.

The really big sins are the easiest to focus on—the times when our giving in to temptation leads to catastrophic results. The adultery that leads to a marriage blowing up. The addiction that takes over. The lust for money and power proves too alluring to resist.

But I suspect that for most of us, it is the little temptations each day that are the bigger problem—the thousand subtle ways that we say, with Adam and Eve, “did God really say...?” The little ways in which, unlike Jesus, we drift away from our true vocation of loving God and neighbour, and begin to drift aimlessly in the noisy land of entertainment and triviality, or settle for a life of comfort and ease, or give in to the cynical climate of our time, or wallow in the me-first, I-deserve-it culture that we are a part of.

And so, we limp from day to day, not really doing anything terrible or obviously sinful, but also not doing anything very *good* or useful, not really spreading the love of Christ in any obvious way, not really being salt or light or good news to anyone.

In one of our Being a Faithful Church discussions in January, Doug Wiebe had a quote of unknown origins that has stuck with me ever since:

“Sin is the good that refuses to become better.”

Many of the voices that we listen to are not necessarily bad, they just aren't good enough. They tell us that partial truths about who we are; they lull us into settling for less than God wants for us.

So the truth about us is that we sometimes listen to the wrong voices. But that's not the *whole* truth. It is *also* true that we are also graced with the freedom and the ability to *listen* and to *choose wisely*.

It is *also* true that the Spirit of God lives within us and has the goal of conforming us into the image of Jesus.

Which leads us to the truth about God.

God is present with us in temptation. God's voice can be heard if we have ears to hear.

It is a voice that we will have to tune our ears to amidst the noise, amidst all the competing voices. It is often a quieter voice, in my experience, and it takes effort, silence, and patience to hear.

It is a voice that always invites, never compels or coerces. It is a voice that stubbornly honours our freedom to choose to listen to other voices.

But it is a voice that leads to life. It is a voice that speaks words of flourishing, of hope.

It is a voice that patiently shows us Jesus and patiently reminds us, "this is what a well-lived life looks like, this is what you were made for. *Listen to him.*"

(Remember our text from the Transfiguration last week?)

As we embark on the season of Lent, may we remember that God is present with us in temptation—just as God was present in the garden, just as God was present in the wilderness.

And may we learn to listen well in this land of competing voices.

Amen.

