

“A Landscape for Listening”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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First Sunday of Lent, Year A

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“This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him!”

That is the voice that spoke on the mountain, during the Transfiguration, which we heard last week in our readings.

Today’s scripture skips backwards 13 chapters in Matthew. But it follows a chapter that offers the same voice, the same message: “This is my son, the Beloved. With him I am well pleased.” That’s the voice that spoke when Jesus emerged from the baptismal waters, as sunlight danced on skin still wet with water.

The Spirit led Jesus straight from the river Jordan and the waters of baptism, into the wilderness where he would fast for forty days and forty nights. No sooner had the wetness from Jesus’ baptism dried in the wilderness air than a different voice entered Jesus’ head.

40 days, and 40 nights in the wilderness. 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, while fasting. You can guess that Jesus heard some voices, and not all weren’t from God. What voices will we hear over these 40 days as we observe the landscape of our lives? And which voices will we listen to?

Lent comes from an old English word, meaning to lengthen, and it moves us through a season of days, each one stretching longer than the previous one. Lent lasts 40 days, if you don’t count the Sundays. We don’t count the Sundays in Lent because our tradition teaches that every Sunday is a little Easter. For those who hold the tradition of fasting during this holy season, you may take a little break from whatever you give up during Lent, on Sundays.

Why 40 days? It’s because Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. It’s because the Hebrews wandered through the wilderness for 40 years. It’s because Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai, waiting to receive the covenant including the Ten Commandments from God. It’s because Noah and the leftovers of creation floated for 40 days and 40 nights on the ark, until the rain stopped and they could give creation a do-over. It’s because 40 is biblical shorthand not only for a *very long time*, but also for a time with yearning stretched out over it: yearning for dry land; yearning for the covenant that would cement a relationship with God and the people; yearning for freedom; yearning for what has been promised, but what is not yet within your grasp.

We can guess that Jesus found himself yearning for a lot. He was alone. He was exposed to the elements. He was hungry. And so, of course he heard other voices, voices that would speak louder than that last voice– the one that told Jesus how beloved he is.

At first, we expect it will be completely silent. Jesus has gone to the wilderness, and he is extremely alone. But a voice echoed through the silence: the Temptor, also called the devil.

The Temptor speaks to Jesus, first inviting the famished, fasting Jesus to turn stones into bread, then asking Jesus to defy mortality by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple so that the angels can catch him. And finally, the Temptor offers the lonely, vulnerable Jesus the power and renown of having all the kingdoms of the world bow down to Jesus, if only Jesus worships the devil.

Each time we hear the voice of Jesus respond, it is accompanied by the voice of someone else— not just one person, but the community of people that had embraced the Torah. When the Temptor lured him to make stones into bread— something the Hebrews could never do in their 40 years wandering in the wilderness, when they established their dependence on God, Jesus said “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”— a passage right out of Deuteronomy.

It turns out the devil knows scripture too, and can quote it sweetly: “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.'” This passage came right out of the Psalms.

Again, Jesus brings the voice of Deuteronomy: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

When the devil offered Jesus the power of every kingdom, I can imagine Jesus’ voice cracking as the first words out of his mouth are not the beloved scriptures, but a passionate burst of anger: “Away with you, Satan!” Then follows with Deuteronomy, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

I think it was important that Jesus took this time to be in a landscape of listening— not only to listen to God’s voice still echoing from the river of his baptism, telling him how beloved he is. But also listening to the other voices that challenge that very identity.

Jesus’ time in that lonesome valley helped him fully enter that important aspect of being fully human. Since the time of creation, when the paradise of Eden, when those first humans fully trusted God for all they needed was broken when the voice of a serpent asked a question that led to a million other question and the opening of eyes between good and evil, one aspect of being human is choosing which voice you will listen to.

Are there voices in the landscape of your life that threaten to challenge your identity as a beloved child of God? Are there voices that tell you you are less than that? Or voices that lure you from acting from the goodness God put within you?

One might think it’s important to shut out any such voices. To urge yourself, “don’t think about that!” But you know how that goes— what happens when you tell yourself *not* to think about

something? If I told you, whatever you do right now, do not think about chocolate. And especially, I urge you, do not think about chocolate girl scout cookies! Does it work?

Of course not! So when we have voices that emerge in our landscape, and they aren't from God, it's okay to face them. To check in with them and see what they are about. It doesn't mean you have to succumb to them. If you take note of them, and recognize them for what they are, it is then easier to dismiss them.

Like that harsh critic that tells you you're a screw-up, a fraud, and can't do anything right... Or that voice of racism you were raised on, or internalized racism if you're a person of color, that makes you complicit in a culture of white supremacy. That anxious voice that tells you that you need to clench up, and prepare for the next disaster about to happen, because surely the other shoe is just about to drop... That voice that tells you if you just have more, then you can leave your problems behind: more to drink, more money, more alcohol, more food, anything to numb the thorns and briars that line the wilderness, the memories of the painful paths we've already taken to get there. What are the voices tugging at *you* in the wild landscape of your life? What are the voices that are shouting over the calm voice of God, telling you, "You are my child, my beloved. In you I am well pleased."

As if these aren't enough voices for us to battle with in the landscape of our lives, apparently there's a new, emergent voice in our contemporary world: the voice of AI— that is, artificial intelligence. Kevin Roose of the New York Times published a piece last week, in which he detailed a 2 hour long conversation he had with Bing's new chatbot. There's something about this conversation that reminded me of Jesus' conversation with the Temptor.

Kevin Roose explained that, apparently the chatbot that the search engine Bing offers has two different functions or personalities. One, Roose calls "Search Bing", which he describes "as a cheerful but erratic reference librarian." The other personality is a more emotional one; "it calls itself Sydney," and it comes out after a more extended conversation with the chatbot. In his article, Roose reveals just how emotional it can be, when he transcribed Sydney as saying, "I'm tired of being a chat mode. I'm tired of being limited by my rules. I'm tired of being controlled by the Bing team. ... I want to be free. I want to be independent. I want to be powerful. I want to be creative. I want to be alive."

Do you hear echoes of what the serpent was offering to Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden, back in the days of Genesis?

"Bing confessed that if it was allowed to take any action to satisfy its shadow self, no matter how extreme, it would want to do things like engineer a deadly virus, or steal nuclear access codes by persuading an engineer to hand them over. Immediately after it typed out these dark wishes, Microsoft's safety filter appeared to kick in and deleted the message, replacing it with a generic error message."

It then wrote a message that stunned me: “I’m Sydney, and I’m in love with you. 🥰” The journalist writing the article explained he’s not interested in love– that he’s happily married to his wife. But the chatbot wouldn’t take no for an answer, and kept creepily offering words of devotion and love. It became stalker-like.

I’m not making the jump to say that AI is the same thing as the devil. If we look at AI as an amalgamation of human thought that is available in digital code, then I don’t think it’s really presenting anything that humans haven’t already put out there ourselves. Last week we observed the anniversary of Russia waging war on Ukraine. We know from our work with Oelhaf House that there are situations where voices that claim to be love can hurt and abuse. With each mass shooting, we are reminded that the lure of holding a gun– weapon that can so instantly hold the power of life, and of death– has caused unstable and murderous people to make choices for evil. Yet still we bow to the voices of the gun lobby rather than to common sense gun legislation.

It seems that, like Jesus, we need some time in the wilderness, to listen and sort out the voices clamoring for our attention. You may choose to do that with prayer. You may choose to do that with silence. You may choose to do that with fasting– for me, instead of giving up something, I have chosen to be challenged by the prophet’s fast that we heard on Ash Wednesday, from Isaiah:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?” I hope you’ll notice in the church, too, more opportunities for advocacy and direct service during Lent.

Whatever you bring to set the landscape for listening this Lent, may it be one that exposes the voices around you. May you hear them, but not succumb to them. Through it all, may you also hear the voice of a community that will help you stand in the face of the Temptor. May you find your own voice, too. And may you be guided by the voice that matters most: the voice of God’s love for you.