



Seeking: Who Will You Listen To?

Gathering

Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in a time of preparation. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*



Gathering

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, the period of 40 days (plus Sundays) leading to the celebration of Easter.

Since the time of the early Church, these 6 weeks or so have been set aside in particular for us to take time to reflect and reset, to check-in with ourselves and with God about where we are in our discipleship. During this time, we are going to explore the theme of "Seeking" - being open to asking and being asked questions that are open and honest and invite us to deeper faith.

Our reflections begin with Jesus in the wilderness - right after his baptism, the Scriptures tell us that the Spirit sent him into the wilderness where he stayed for 40 days and nights. Today we are asking ourselves, who will you listen to? What voices speak loudest to us and how do we focus on the One whose voice matters most?

Light Candle

We light the candle - focussing our attention, allowing ourselves to be drawn to its flame. We look to Jesus, the light of the world, a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, breathed life into this Land and her Peoples.

From time beyond our reckoning the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have blessed this place through their care and concern.

We pay our respects to their Elders and Leaders, past and present and emerging, and we pray for the future of their communities.

May we walk gently and respectfully on this Land.

(c) 2017, A.Koh-Butler, This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here

Call to Worship

Gathered in community, we step into the unknown.

That place beyond place where it feels like there are more questions than answers.

We are listening together for voices in the wilderness.

In this time, we wonder what we might hear if we were to really listen to the wild wonders of God.

We are listening together for voices in the wilderness.

We tread lightly,
but buoyed with hope as we make our way into this season of change.

We are listening together for voices in the wilderness.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Ash Wednesday, 2023, p.18

Listen! There is hope to be found here.
Listen! God calls you by name here.
Listen! There is love that abides here.
This world is full of chatter, so may we do our best to listen.
God is speaking.
Let us worship.

Sanctified Art, Words for Worship

Sing - A Voice Is Heard (ATW 430)

We sing a song that names that God's voice can be heard from the deepest seas and the highest hills, in the heart of life.

*Come, let us praise our God,
come let us sing for joy.
With a heart of thanks we give honour.
You are a mighty God,
you are the source of life.
Creator God, we give praise.*

Through the darkest night – a voice is heard.
Through the breaking dawn – a voice is heard.
Through the heart of life – a voice is heard.
All creation sings! God is heard!
Come, let us praise our God...

From the deepest seas – a voice is heard.
From the highest hills – a voice is heard.
From the rich dark earth – a voice is heard.
All creation sings! God is heard!
Come, let us praise our God...

© 1998 Trish Watts & Monica O'Brien

Prayer of Confession - intro

Friends, if you are seeking grace, this moment is for you.
If you are seeking growth, this moment is for you.
If you are seeking honesty, this moment is for you.
In the prayer of confession, we admit to ourselves and to God that we do not have it all figured out. And in that vulnerability, we are surrounded by God's grace.

Sanctified Art, Words for Worship

Sing - Seek Ye First The Kingdom of God (TIS 745) - v.1

*Seek ye first the kingdom of God
And God's righteousness.
And all these things will be added unto you,
Allelu, alleluia.*

Holy God,
Too often we treat your Word like a radio station—something we can tune in and out of when it's convenient. Our minds are full of ads, emails, news updates, and notifications. In the midst of this clutter, we tend to gravitate toward the voices that think like us—easily ignoring the voices being silenced, easily ignoring your voice.

Sanctified Art, Words for Worship

Sing - Seek Ye First The Kingdom of God (TIS 745) - v.2

*Ask and it shall be give unto you
seek and you shall find
knock and the door shall be opened unto you
Allelu, alleluia.*

Holy God,
Forgive us for failing to listen.
Forgive us for getting caught in distractions.
Forgive us for forgetting what your voice sounds like.
Drain the distractions from our minds and help us turn once again toward you.
With earnest hearts we pray, Amen.

Sanctified Art, Words for Worship

Sing - Seek Ye First The Kingdom of God (TIS 745) - v.3

*We shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word
that proceeds from the mouth of God.
Allelu, alleluia.*

Words of Assurance

Friends, even when we tune God out,
even when we prioritise other voices,
even when we do all the talking and fail to listen,
we are still held by God.
Our sins are forgiven.
Nothing could ever separate us from God's love.
So with joy in our hearts, we affirm together:

We are loved!

We are held in grace!

We belong to God.

Sanctified Art, Words for Worship

Sing - Seek Ye First The Kingdom of God (TIS 745) - chorus

*Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia
Allelu, alleluia.*

Karen Lafferty

Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but 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.'...

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' ²The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will

be like God, knowing good and evil.’⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ ⁴ But he answered, ‘It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

⁶ saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for 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.” ’

⁷ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹ and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.” ’

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

For the Word of God in Scripture,

for the Word of God among us,

for the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God!

Listen - Land of The Seeking (Sanctified Art)

This song will accompany us over the next 6 weeks or so - it invites us to inhabit the Land of the Seeking... <https://vimeo.com/800216630>

Reflection

Holy God, listening is always easier said than done.

We shuffle into this space and try to quiet our minds, but the list of distractions is long.

We need your help to listen.

So today we ask that you would marinate us in your Word.

Dust the cobwebs from our ears.

Stir our souls awake.

Crack open our hearts to make room for you.

Scoop us up. Put us in your pocket.

Carry us with you wherever you go.

We want to hear you,

really hear you,

so speak to us now.

With hope we pray, Amen.

Sanctified Art, Words for Worship

As I mentioned at the beginning of the service, the six weeks or so leading up to Easter is observed across the Christian Church in a time known as Lent. There is good evidence to suggest that this observance has been part of the Christian Church since its very early days, and was particularly a time when people would prepare for baptism, learning the stories of Jesus and the ideas of Christian faith and living.

But it is also true that in more recent times, participation in the Lent practice has become somewhat less widespread (particularly amongst the evangelical churches) and even less understood in the wider community. And there are many good reasons why it can be argued that this ancient should be abandoned altogether.

The word itself, "Lent", is a bit problematic for us. The English word *Lent* is a shortened form of the Old English word *lencten*, meaning "spring season" possibly derived from the lengthening of the days which of course works for our friend in the northern hemisphere but is a bit lost on us in the south as we head into Autumn.

For many Christians around the world, particularly those who follow the Orthodox and Roman Catholic expressions of Christian faith, the emphasis of this time is on prayer, mortifying the flesh, repentance of sins, almsgiving, simple living, and self-denial. It is generally considered to be a serious and generally sad time. And while each of these practices might offer something to our spiritual growth, perhaps unfortunately it seems that this expression of Lent has been reduced to the idea of looking sad for 40 days and giving up something like chocolate or coffee.

But what if we take a fresh look at what it might mean for us to look toward the celebration of Easter with fresh eyes?

What if we return to the idea of preparing ourselves and our community by considering who we are as followers of Jesus and being committed to following Jesus more closely?

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday with the invitation to "repent" - but remember we are trying to reclaim that word. It is not just about a moralistic conversion to living a perfect life - whatever that is. It is all about refocusing our lives on the life to which God calls us.

The prophet Joel puts it like this:

"return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for [God] is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." Joel 2:12-13

In other words, you can fast and weep and grieve and even tear your clothing (as was the custom in ancient times to show the world you were grieving), but none of that matters without attention to the heart.

And the reality is that when we stop for long enough to pay attention to God, we discover that there are plenty of ways that we as individuals, or we as a community, are not living as God intends.

So it often means admitting that we have lost our way.

Sometimes it means admitting that we have done the wrong thing.

Always it means turning ourselves to face God and to move towards the way of life God has always intended for us.

Which brings me to the readings we have just heard - and more ways that we have misinterpreted or allowed our understanding to accumulate much more than is there in the

text. And in the process, we have also jumbled together a whole bunch of ideas in a way that is not always helpful.

Let's start with Genesis 2 and the idea of sin.

Yes sin - a word loaded now with baggage and often used as a moralistic weapon or a way to silence or discredit. But let's look carefully at what the opening part of the Scriptures has to say.

The reading we heard is just part of the story in Genesis 2-4 that has come to be referred to, not all that helpfully, as "the Fall". It is one of those stories we all think we know what it says and what it means, but if we look more closely we may discover that much has been added to the story over time in terms of interpretation and understanding, often deeply entrenched in contemporary culture.

This story does not equate the serpent with satan or the devil as he appears later in the Scriptures, and certainly not the figure that appears to talk with Jesus in Matthew 4. As Rev Danielle Shroyer points out in our devotional materials, "in the ancient world, snakes were a symbol of transformation. Their venom held the possibility of both poison and medicine."¹

This story also does not make any judgment about the woman alone, or about sex being the source of human sin. The idea that we are all sinful just because we come from the act of sexual intercourse is simply not here.

What this story is really about is the nature of the relationship between God and God's people. The story is not so much concerned with when sin arrived in the world but with why and how humans have got caught up in it - in fact, the word "sin" does not even appear in this text.²

So in order to come grips with what is happening here, we need to look more carefully. First, the garden is not a place of idealistic human habitation or, indeed, some kind of paradise. Eden is a *divine* dwelling place, it's God's dwelling place, and humanity is invited in with freedom to explore and "to till it and keep it" (2:15). God invites humanity into God's space and gives us freedom - the kind of freedom that is at its best when its limits are known and clear - stay away from that tree! (2:17)

But the serpent, convinces the woman that God's warning that to eat of the fruit will result in death is not true (3:4). Which is where this story leaves somewhat of a dilemma, or at least a question about the nature of death, because the man and woman both eat the fruit and they don't die, as such (3:6). Perhaps, rather, it is about the death of innocence and the reality that all of us live in the complexity of good, evil and everything in between.

Let's consider the fruit - what did they eat? Certainly, the fruit is not an apple. It is described in Genesis 2:17 as "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil". What's that? It is kind of like saying, "all of Australia, from Sydney to Perth" - you mention the extremes to capture the whole (technically, a *merism*). So the tree of good and evil is expressing the idea of the whole of divine knowledge, and to partake of that fruit is to step

¹ Rev Danielle Shroyer, *Sanctified Art Seeking Lenten Devotion*, p.7

² Thanks to *By The Well*, presented by Fran Barber and Howard Wallace, <https://bythewell.com.au/episodes/a214-lent-1>

outside of humanities' creatureliness, or at least, to come to understand not just right and wrong but the myriad of greyness that exists within the whole.

No longer blissfully naive of the extent of the world's struggle, they become conscious of their own nakedness and so cover themselves (3:7) and then they hide from God. But notice, if we read on in the next verses, the first thing that God does is to seek them out (3:9). No doubt their experience of life will now be much harder than if they had stayed within the boundaries God had set, but God does not abandon them.

Alongside this, we hear Matthew's account of Jesus' time in the wilderness.

Right after his baptism, where he has heard God affirming him (Matthew 3:17), God's Spirit leads him into the wilderness to be "tested by the devil" (4:1).

The writer of Matthew refers to this character as *διαβόλου*, translated into English as "the devil". It carries a meaning more like the accuser.

We often refer to this passage as the temptations of Jesus. But Matthew's account says that this character, the devil, "tests" Jesus. It is not so much about the devil trying to get Jesus to do something wrong or to "sin", it is rather about a testing that is designed to "cut through to the centre of the issue, to engage deeply with the heart of the matter".³ So this is not about trying to catch Jesus, but about Jesus being equipped to know the heart of God, and for us it is about how to answer when voices entice us away from the life to which God calls us.

This is a great example of how the texts of scripture can be used in ways that are not helpful; used in ways that would enable the abuse of power. And it is also a great reminder of how important it is that we know the Scriptures so we can engage constructively when people start quoting select verses to support their arguments.

How good is your biblical literacy?

How attuned are you to God's way in the world so that the voices that bombard us everyday - in our homes, on our TV and radios, on social media - all the voices that get inside our heads - how attuned are we to God's way that these voices are seen and heard for what they are?

How convinced are we of God's truths that we are content to live within the framework God has established for us - or are we seeking a wider horizon?

Or, how brave are we to ask deep questions of God and of ourselves - as we seek to understand the world around us and the life to which God calls us?

So, whether during Lent, or at any other time of the year, if fasting helps you to focus more deeply on God and what God is saying, by all means do that. Maybe it is giving up a meal or a particular type of food; or maybe it is giving up or reducing the amount of social media we consume or being more intentional about the books or articles we read or the podcasts we listen to.

And prayer doesn't have to be in a dark room on your own (although Matthew 6:6 would suggest that is not a bad environment to try), it can be on your morning walk or as you are weeding the garden or mowing the lawns - but making space for honest conversations with God is a vital part of how we hear what God is trying to say to us.

Perhaps, for you, it is about de-cluttering - about learning again to live simply. Perhaps now is the time to de-clutter your diary, try to be less busy, or at least more intentional about how you spend your time. Perhaps now is the time to de-clutter physically and to spend this time tidying, sorting and giving away what you no longer need.

If you have ever found yourself backing out of a debate that you knew was going in a direction you weren't comfortable with but you felt ill-equipped to speak up, then perhaps

³ <https://johntsquires.com/2023/02/23/testing-not-temptation-in-the-wilderness-matt-4-lent-1a/>

now is the time to carve out space and to get into the Scriptures for yourself, or to join a Bible Study group or more formal learning - there are lots of ways to engage both in-person and online.

Lent certainly doesn't have to be about sadness, grief and self-denial.

Nor should the practices we engage with at this time be only for the next 6 weeks or so. But here is an opportunity, to tune in again to God's voice calling us to turn back to the path of Jesus Christ.

The voices around us are often loud and distracting. So what will you do to enable you to hear God's voice through the noise?

Let's pray...

God, so much distracts us from you.

Help us to carve out time to sit with you,
to listen, to really listen.

And then give us courage to live as you intend.

In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Responding

Sing - Who Will You Listen To?

The voices from the past
That echo through our minds
Like noisy ghosts haunt and harass
With words unkind
Who will we listen to?
Lies that bind and abase?
Or God who counters words untrue
With words of grace?

A rushing flood of hate
In news we often see
Conceals God's kingdom in a great
cacophony
Who will we listen to?
The chaos all around?
Or God's dream of a world made new
Where love abounds?

Society demands
We always strive for more
Accumulating wealth and land
And leave the poor
Who will we listen to?
The tempter's jealousy?
Or God's provision and pursuit
Of equity?

© Anna Strickland, 2021. Commissioned by A Sanctified Art, LLC. Free for congregational use.

Prayer for Others (Michele Broad)

Eternal God,
we come before you, humble, fragile and mortal.
We are but dust amongst a universe of dust,
and yet you love us and all creation.

We pray for the life of the world as it cries out in pain,
death is never far away ...our land, our plant life, our waterways, our animals....much is
threatened or misused....Your resurrection is needed more than ever.
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

We remember our loved ones, close to home and far away,

all who we cherish and adore, may they know your love today.
Hold them in your care and guide their way
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

We think of the people who find life difficultso many lost, afraid, alone, struggling
and wish them to know your peace. We pray for society to open their hearts to their need
and care.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

We remember the people who are bringing new life to birth, those at the start of life's
journey and ask your blessing upon them.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

And we ponder the people who are close to death and preparing for the journey beyond
this one, may they know your presence.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

We hold places suffering from violence, persecution, natural disaster or man-made hells
and pray that everyone affected would sense your love around them.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers. Amen.

Offering

As we have received, so we consider our response...

*We make space now to think about what we have heard and seen today and consider our
response.*

*As we make our offering - we remember again that this is not just about money - either
here in the plate or through a bank transfer - this is also about how we are generous with
our time and energy and gifts; and about how we resolve to live differently because we
have encountered the living Christ.*

Let us pray...

Take these gifts we offer, loving God, and use them for your work.

Take our very selves – our hopes, our dreams, our plans, our wonderings –
and use them, too, to make your world a better place.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Ash Wednesday, 2023, p.26

Sending

Sing - We Seek You With Our Questions God (tune: Ellacombe (TIS 361))

We seek you with our questions, God, with
open heart and mind;

we long to live a fresher life
and leave our past behind,

for all that we have known before
has faded and grown worn.

We seek you with our questions, God, that
we might be reborn.

We wonder why things come to pass and
how to come alive.

Where do your living waters flow? How
can dry bones revive?

Who are you, God, who meet us here with
wisdom and with sign?

We seek you with our questions, God, we
yearn for truth divine.

We search for you in garden green where
once you gave us birth;
We search for you in desert parched and
all throughout the earth.
With wonder, worry, doubt, and awe we
search through night and day.
We seek you with our questions, God, at
home and far away.

You seek us with your questions, God,
inviting us to dare
to know you and to love you more,
to grow through act and prayer.
“Who will you trust and follow now? My
truth is all around.”
You seek us with your questions, God, you
seek and we are found.

Text: Hannah C. Brown, b.1980 © 2022 GIA Publications, Inc.

Sending Affirmation

In a world full of noise,
we believe that God is speaking.
In a world full of chaos,
we believe that God is singing.
In a world full of temptation,
we believe that God is healing.
Church, who will you listen to?
We will listen to God—our Creator, Friend, and Guide.
Church, what will you listen for?
***We will listen for water in the desert, for the wind of the Spirit,
for the laughter of children,
for the sound of open doors,
and for God’s voice, who calls us beloved.
Amen.***

Blessing

As you leave this place,
may God bless you with seeking.
Seek out the hungry.
Seek the weary.
Seek the good in every person you pass.
Seek out the hopeful.
Seek the faithful.
Seek God in each of us.
As you seek and as you wonder,
may you find what you are looking for.
In the name of our loving God,
who is always seeking us,
go now in peace. Amen.

Liturgy adapted from material from:
Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent-Easter 2023
A Sanctified Art: Seeking, www.sanctifiedart.org

Rev Kath Merrifield
26 February 2023