

“What voices do we listen to?”

February 21, 2010

Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

I.

What voices do we listen to in our lives? Everyday, there are voices of all kinds—seeking our attention, vying for our ear. What voices do we listen to?

Today marks the first Sunday of Lent. Traditionally, Lent is a time when we look reflectively at our priorities and commitments, with an aim towards cleansing our spirit. Renewing and cleansing our spirit is where the common practice of *giving up something for Lent* comes from.

It’s not unusual for Christians to *fast* in Lent—for a particular day of the week (during the seven week period), or perhaps for a period of days; or to give up something, like chocolate ... or caffeine ... or reality TV.

The idea is to live in a way that enables us to have a closer walk with God, and to live more in tune with God’s purposes. Our sacrificing of *whatever it is*, is a reminder of the Lenten theme of surrender. As the words of Genesis 13 remind us,

Remember, from dust you have come and to dust you shall return.

These are the very words that are spoken in the administering of the *ashes* on Ash Wednesday.

All of this serves to prepare us for the *holy week* experience of breaking bread with Jesus in the Upper Room; of Jesus’ awful, wrenching suffering on the cross; and the journey we all take through LENT as we move towards the celebration and joy of Easter Sunday.

But, again, **what voices do we listen to?**

II.

The voice of God, on the one hand; which is the voice of our covenantal commitments?? Or the voice of the devil (the voice of sin) which deceives us into a false sense of well-being.

Jesus, too, knew temptation. In our reading from **Luke’s gospel**, right after his baptism, he goes into the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted by the devil. We’ll never know exactly what that means. But whatever it means, Jesus has to sort himself out. Who is he? What’s he going to do? This is always the human situation, isn’t it? What are we going to do?

What voices are we going to listen to?

We all live with different elements and forms of temptation. Temptation, friends, invites us to live a lie. With Jesus, in his wilderness experience, the devil tempts him three times. The lie, each time, was that he (Jesus) was God ...

1. And that, therefore, he could command stone into bread to feed his swelling hunger.
2. And that all the kingdoms of the world would be his if he'd just worship the evil one.
3. And that no matter what he did, he'd be protected; he'd be lifted up. He'd be the center of reality, the center of all that is.

After each temptation (three times), Jesus' response was to refer to teachings of the covenant (the holy scriptures) to deny the devil's proddings.

As human beings, we live in a world with a whole range of temptations every day, don't we?

- Temptations to be less than our best ...
- Temptations towards laziness and apathy. Temptations to take the easy way out.
- Temptations to be greedy and to want more than we need.
- Temptations to NOT do the thing we know we should do.

And every day, we have to sort stuff out and remember—all in light of our covenantal commitments—who we are. And we have to choose what voices to listen to.

President Reagan once remarked that *Middle age is when you're faced with two temptations and you choose the one that gets you home by 9:00 p.m.*

The point is, we have to choose.

III.

Just as with Jesus' encounter with the devil in the wilderness, the voice of God is the voice that calls us to life. It's the voice that calls us into covenant; and it's the voice—over the years—that reminds us of our covenantal commitments.

Our covenantal commitments are our most fundamental commitments. They're our commitments to relationships and to community and to God—commitments which we can easily take for granted.

Covenant suggests a relationship and a certain reciprocity. When we join a church, we form a covenant with the church. As members, we do certain things for the church; in turn, the church does certain things for us. It's a *two-way* interrelationship. In our

covenant with God, God does things for us; and we, in turn, do things for God.

To live lives that honor the foundational covenants of our lives, therefore, is to live lives that honor God and that honor our relationships with family and friends. It's to live lives that honor community—our relational connections that run to the ends of the earth.

Friends, we are a *covenantal people*. Biblically, relationally, and even ontologically (who we are in the nature of our being), that's who we are; we are a *people of the covenant*.

The question of *temptation* and **what voices we listen to?** needs to be understood in this light—in the context of covenant. Our covenantal commitments are binding on us.

What this means is that when we sin, we don't just hurt ourselves. We hurt our covenantal community—our family, to be sure; but also our friends ... even the community in which we live. It's all interconnected.

In terms of consequences—the consequences aren't just personal; they're communal. Certainly, this is what we see in the Tiger Woods situation—which he confessed in his public statement last Friday. The hurt and huge disappointment his infidelities brought to so many people—family and friends, to be sure ... but also his millions of fans ... his sponsors and business associates.

The world will be watching to see how Tiger lives out the next few months and years of his life. Personally, I hope he stands up, with a humble heart and a contrite spirit, and becomes the man he has the potential to become. When he returns to golf, I will root for him again.

For the rest of his days, I hope he's able to commit his core being, along with his impulses, to a higher purpose.

IV.

The truth of our lives, friends, is that—most of the time—we know what we should do. We know. But we allow ourselves to buy into a false reality.

Don't we sometimes wonder: what is the thought process that goes in to making bad decisions around our human temptations? How does this all play out? Why do we listen to the voice we know we should not be listening to? Why can't we *do* what will enable us to sleep well at night—guilt free? What makes us cross the line that first time?

Why does Eve listen to the serpent; and why does Adam listen to Eve? And why does King David, the most powerful king in Israel's turbulent history—walking about on the king's roof top one day ... seeing the beautiful Bathsheba bathing nearby,

have her sent to him ... and lay with her? Why does he do that?

And then, as if that weren't enough, David schemes to have her husband, Uriah the Hittite—one of his soldiers—killed in battle. On one level, kings can do whatever they want. However, on a deeper level, the spiritual level ... on the level of covenantal obedience, David has sinned grievously.

Later, he's courageously confronted by the prophet Nathan and condemned, leading to his powerful confession in Psalm 51.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

So often, our problem is life is that we listen to the voice of *immediate gratification* rather than the voice of *probable consequences*. What keeps us from thinking long-term and considering the possible consequences of our choices?

What voices do we listen to?

V.

There's the story I like to tell of the old Cherokee Indian and his grandson ... having a reflective conversation. The old man is telling the boy about *the battle that goes on inside people*.

My son, the battle is between TWO wolves inside us all.

One is EVIL. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, and ego.

The other is GOOD. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather. **But which wolf wins?**

To which the old Cherokee replied, simply, *the one we feed*.

Everyday, we make choices about what forces within us we are going to feed, what voices we are going to listen to.

Our challenge is to seek God's purposes in all that we do and *do* the right thing ... rather than what our eyes and our bodies prompt in us; and to not yield to the *tug of the world* and to the *desires of the flesh* and to *spiritual laziness and apathy*?

VI.

Always, along with the world, God waits to see what we humans are going to do ... to see **what voices we're going to listen to.**

Again, friends, today is the first Sunday of LENT, a period of spiritual cleansing and renewal. It's a time of remembering the depths and the passion of God's love—a time when, hushed in prayer, we remember our mortality ...

*Come close to us, O Holy One, come close.
Call us, again and again, to the spiritual high ground of your presence.*

*Be our companion, O spirit of love ...
In the desert of our lives, never let us walk alone.*

*Touch us in our need ... awaken us again and again to your divine purposes, through
Jesus Christ our Lord.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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