

Who will you listen to?

Sermon 174 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 26, 2023
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Last week a friend of mine, who is also a pastor, received a letter in the mail. With his permission, I'd like to share with you some of what that letter said.

To My Faithful Servant,

I wanted to take a moment to thank you for your faithful service to the Kingdom of Darkness. I have many disciples throughout the world and you are one of my personal favorites. I consider you a "chip off the old block", as they say, because you are a master of deception like myself.

Thank you for your tireless efforts at twisting Biblical scriptures, quoting selected scriptures out of context, and obfuscating clear passages to confuse and deceive the congregation. I am making great strides in the corruption of families, communities, and nations and could not accomplish this without key players such as yourself. Disciples like you make my job so much easier!

[the members of] your church are on the fast track to Hell according to plan and people like you are not only shoving them over the edge but convincing spiritually ignorant people in the community to cheer them as they fall. Great job! As I said, my plan could not move so smoothly without faithful disciples like yourself.

Please continue doing what you're doing as it's quite effective. ...

Your Loving Lord of Darkness,

Satan

(The author even signed his name by hand under the typed letter)

In addition to the fact that this sounds like something straight out of C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, I have to admit that this is one of the more artfully crafted pieces of "hate mail" I've ever seen.

It is sad to say this kind of feedback is not all that uncommon. Most of the pastors I know have files (either paper or digital) of letters they've received from people who vehemently disapproved of their work - usually something they said in a sermon.

But most pastors I know also keep another file, letters of affirmation, love, and support. Hopefully the latter is more full than the former. But we need them both to remind us of the delicate and

supremely important nature of the work that we do when we interpret scripture for our place and time.

So today as we approach the scripture - a piece that addresses the big topics of sin, evil, and the very nature of God - let us do so with a spirit of humility and in prayer echoing the words of the psalmist:

*Lord, we know the gravity of this moment.
We feel the heavy responsibility
of interpreting your word for our world.
So may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable unto you,
O Lord our rock and our redeemer.*

Pastors aren't the only ones with files of hate mail and fan mail. No matter what we do professionally, academically, or in our spare time, we all deal with voices - both external and internal - that make us doubt who we are and make us worry that we're never going to be good enough.

Maybe your voices don't come in the mail with a return address in Hell, Michigan (that's where my friend's letter allegedly came from). Instead, maybe the voices come from comments on our social media posts, remarks from a peer in the hallway between classes or meetings, feedback from a supervisor, or even conversations with loved ones who know us best and know exactly how to push our buttons.

Maybe they are more subtle than that. Maybe the messages we receive and file away in our minds come from magazines, newspapers, and tv ads. Maybe they come from TikTok videos and Instagram posts that remind us how to look, how to dress, and how to decorate our homes.

Whether we like it or not, our world is filled with messages - both subtle and overt - that shape our ideas about ourselves, about the world around us, and sometimes even about God. Though these messages are coming at us from more directions than ever, and at a faster pace than ever, the truth is, there have always been voices - both external and internal - that fill our minds and compete with the divine voice of our Creator who made us, who loves us, and who calls us *good*.

The first example of these competing voices shows up in the snake of Genesis 3. Much is written about the meaning and significance of the snake in this ancient origin story. In the second century, Justin Martyr "would be among the first theologians to make the connection between the serpent in the garden and Satan. He believed that Satan, disguised as the serpent, participated in the fall of humanity by deceiving the woman in the garden of Eden, and through her, Adam."

Two hundred years later, Tertullian, another famous Christian apologist, "argued that because of Satan's deception of Adam, the entire human race, through Adam's seed, became infected with damnation."

A hundred years later, Augustine continued to build upon this line of thinking, crafting his Doctrine of Original Sin which states that because of Adam and Eve, all of humanity is born into a state of sin- that we do not commit sin rather, we contract it (like a disease) from our ancestors.

Though these ideas are not explicitly included in the Bible, they have dominated much of Christian thought and they eventually became the foundation for a theology that necessitated God's sacrificial act on the cross to atone for the "victory earned by Satan in the garden". This theology, developed hundreds of years after Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection, was reinterpreted in the middle ages, using the feudal language and imagery of a theologian named Anselm and *his* theory of sacrificial atonement, though it is just one of many, still holds a prominent spot in the minds of Christians today.

[that is why this text is so hard to read and interpret, there are so many voices from 2000+ years of history shaping the way we look at it]

Some scholars both ancient and modern, interpret the story a little differently. Like Rev. Danielle Shroyer, who writes that in the ancient world, "serpents were a symbol of transformation [because] their venom held the possibility of both poison and medicine."

Given that the Genesis story never identifies the serpent as anything other than a natural part of God's created order, one could say that our story, the human story, begins in the same paradox of possibility: *somewhere between poison and medicine.*

...Somewhere between the poisonous voices that drown out the voice of God, and those that are more like medicineoffering healing, grace, and love.

God told Adam (before Eve was created, mind you) that if they ate the fruit of that tree, they should die. Though their rebellious bites did not end up leading to an untimely death, the first human beings *did* experience a death of sorts. It was a death of their innocence. The tree didn't cause their physical death, it was instead an existential death, the death of the naive and protected children that once roamed the garden free of shame and guilt, free of doubt and insecurity, free of comparison and competition, free of fear, and free of the heavy responsibility that accompanies all of those things.

This is a coming of age story. It is a transitional story that leads us from idealism to realism. It is a story of transformation as the first human beings begin to step out on their own, exploring their humanity for all its freedom and all its consequences. It is a coming of age story that describes the sometimes painful and complicated realities within which life happens. Life.. lived between the paradox of poisonous and medicinal voices all competing for our attention. All shaping our ideas about ourselves, our neighbors, and our God.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could somehow rid ourselves of all the poisonous voices?

The external messaging that reminds us of all the stuff we don't have and all the ways we will never measure up. And wouldn't it be nice if we could silence the internal voices as well, the ones

that overwhelm us with shame and insecurity, and cause us to doubt the most important truth of our existence: that God loves us *just as we are*? Wouldn't it be nice if we could live in a Genesis 2 world where it is just us and God walking together through the gardens of life?

Up to that point in the story, the only voice present was the voice of God. And God used God's voice to create and affirm. Remember those epic words from chapter 1: *Let there be light!* And there was. Then, after spurts of creative voice, God paused and looked at what was and saw that it was *good*.

Then God gave some instructions, setting boundaries in an attempt to protect Adam and Eve. Like a loving parent, trying to protect her children by monitoring what they watch on YouTube and the music they listen to, telling them not to drive too fast or stay out too late... advice that every loving parent hopes will help their children delay the human realities of grief, trouble, and heartache just a little bit longer. In this same way, God is trying to protect humanity by saying, *You are good. I love you. Stay away from that tree.*

But as soon as God's voice quiets the voice of the serpent enters and calls everything into question. Some might call that voice Sin as it blurs the lines between good and evil; ultimately luring Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. But some might also contend that that voice is a representation of all the voices that speak to us and cause us to question the goodness of God and the blessing of beloved-ness that God has spoken over us all.

There is a poem in the lenten devotional guides, some of you may have read it this week. It is written by Rev, Sarah Are Speed and it is called: *Who will you listen to?* Truly, it reads like a litany of all the many voices clamoring for our attention, shaping our outlook, and taking up space in our lives.

Here are her words:

who will you listen to?
Twitter or the BBC / the ads on late-night television /
the wind as she blows / the echo of children playing /
the quiet of snow / the ice bucket challenge /
the phone when it rings / your pastor / your mother /
your doctor / your gut / the tension in your shoulders /
the restaurant singing happy birthday
/ audio books / TED talks / the rhythm of the music /
the coffee drip in the morning / your therapist
/ the wisdom of the enneagram /
the way your heart comes alive when you're being creative /
the man on the corner asking for change / the kid on the subway selling chocolate / the
labels on the makeup bottle that promise timeless beauty /
the magazines that tell you you need timeless beauty /

astrology / the Dow Jones /
the hiss of the radiator / the pitter patter of little feet /
financial advisors / the top 40 pop / the top 40 country /
the New York Times / the rumor mill / the Book of Psalms /
your sense of self /
Jesus, when he says, "I am with you, always."

Friends, we live our lives in a sea of competing voices. A world that is not safe, protected, or simple. Rather a world caught in a paradox of possibility between poison and medicine... and we have the opportunity to choose over and over and over again...

Will we give our attention to the voices of the snakes, or will we listen instead to the voice of God that is crying out to us saying:

You are good
You are loved
You are held in grace
You belong to God.

Who will *you* listen to?