Listening: A Sacred Path

February 17-April 4, 2021

Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Ave S | Minneapolis, MN
westminstempls.org
...Kai ὁ λόγος σάρξ ἐγένετο...
Dear friends,

Since September 2020, at Westminster we have committed ourselves to A Year of Listening in our life as a congregation.

In light of all that has been revealed over the last 12 months about our nation – health disparities laid bare by Covid, deeply imbedded racism shown once again in the death of unarmed Black persons at the hands of police, widespread acceptance of falsehood in our politics – we acknowledge our need to be attentive in new ways to voices we may not have previously heard.

This collection of reflections on Westminster’s 2021 Lenten theme, The Listening Season, offers rich insight into the practice of listening in the spiritual lives of our church members. We thank the writers; I encourage you to listen carefully to their voices.

These essays are written and included here with minimal editing. In its public language, Westminster customarily uses non-gendered language in reference to God. Here the authors speak from personal experience, using their own words. Recognizing these intimate expressions reflect particular perspectives, we have not edited the use of pronouns for God.

As my own hearing disability has worsened in recent years I have grown increasingly aware of how hard we have to work at listening. Each morning I can’t wait to put in my hearing aids, trusting that the day surely holds voices to which I must be attentive. I hope you approach the essays in this Lenten booklet in the same way!

Finally, thank you to the team who worked so diligently on this labor of love, led by Heather Heefner. We are grateful.

Grace and peace,

Tim

Timothy Hart-Andersen
Senior Pastor
Pilate, by Timothy Trent Blade, woodcut print, 1983
Dear Westminster Community,

Listening – A Sacred Path is a compilation of reflections, poems and prayers written by our members for this Lenten season of listening. During Lent, the church sets apart 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter for us to remember Jesus’ 40 days in the desert, to reflect on faith, and attain a deeper intimacy with God. Entering into Lent takes quiet time and sacred listening.

We invite you to read the daily Lenten meditations and prayers in this devotional. We invite you to the discipline of Lent. We invite you to the practice of hope that emerges from an honest reckoning with Jesus’ death and life. We invite you to unearth your own story of sacred listening.

The theme of this year’s book is timely. In 2020, we have all been changed by the world pandemic of Covid-19, by racial reckoning and by deep political unrest. This year has been very hard and full of learning. Many of us have slowed down because we have had to. We have had more time to listen.

In Life Together, Bonhoeffer writes, “...listening can be a greater service than speaking.” In these reflections, you will hear how our community has listened to God, to each other, and to their own deep inner wisdom. You will listen to what they learned and how they acted from these places of sacred listening.

This book was made possible by many hands. We’d like to thank David Shinn, our pastoral advisor, Rodney Allen Schwartz, Director, the Westminster Gallery and Archive, the Westminster communication team and all those who contributed the thoughtful meditations. Thank you all.

Grace and Peace,
Heather Heefner

Lenten Book 2021 Editorial Team
Heather Heefner
Sara Donaldson
Susan Dray
Lucy Quaintance
One of my favorite books is “Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner.” One powerful paragraph provides the theme for the book, and I often revisit it in difficult times.

“If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say...it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement or gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis, all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

Probably your last year has been shaped much like mine: isolation from others, from fear of catching a contagious disease communicated by people we love—or don’t even know. Our consciousness of death has never been more intense.

Suddenly this familiar passage brought me up short. Tears stung my eyes. Words like “self-absorption” and “oblivious” came to mind, short-circuiting my usual joyful dive into the waters of Buechner’s wisdom. How can I focus on my own life when so many have died? When I am aware of the racism all around me but feel frozen, not knowing what I can do to make it better? Shouldn’t others’ lives be the focus of my listening?

Re-reading the passage for days, I finally found the key that unlocked my ambivalence. Every beautiful fragment of Buechner’s wisdom is pointing us toward an in-the-moment appreciation of our own lives, yes. At the same time, his words say, Wake up! Embrace a future that, as Alanna has said, we may not yet be able to imagine. In a later meditation, Buechner quotes the additional words I needed: Be not afraid, for I am with you.

Amen.

*Kathleen E. Campbell*
In my past ministry as a hospital chaplain, I was quickly drawn into the spiritual discipline of sitting in silence – especially when the patient had been inundated with the “noise” of the health care providers, their families and the implications of their diagnosis. In that silent space I had a choice: to begin thinking about what the “appropriate” words were to be spoken, or, to allow the barrage of silence to overtake me, becoming vulnerable to its presence. Fortunately, my spiritual inclinations were to do the latter. Eventually, when the time was right, the patient would speak truth into their situation. My role was listening/reflecting. Was it uncomfortable? Sometimes. Was it worth it? Definitely!!

We live in a society where noise comes at us in all forms - through the media, friends, family - it surrounds us. But now, because of Covid and sheltering in place, there are times when we have no other options but to sit alone in silence. However, within the silence we are invited to hear a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:9-13) that speaks to us giving comfort, insight and wisdom.

Indeed, during his ministry, Jesus was often surrounded by the noise of crowds crying out to him for help and he did his best to respond. However, sometimes he took time to retreat, to sit in the silence, to listen to the Spirit guiding him and to refresh himself to continue the journey.

During this time of Lent, we are reminded that this practice of solitude and silence is how Jesus began his ministry. It’s how he made important decisions and dealt with grief, doubt or even fear. It’s how he cared for his soul.

It is then, by example, a gift of love Jesus offers to us to listen for that still, small voice of comfort in times of distress.

Denise Dunbar-Perkins (Covid long-hauler - sitting in silence)
THE HEART’S CALL

When we quiet and gently rest in the present,
listening carefully to the heart’s call,
what once was seen as a wound
is an invitation to witness and feel it all.

Paying attention to how it feels in our physical, emotional, and spiritual bodies,
we can recognize where to care,
as we slowly breathe in
this Earth’s sustaining air.

Tending gently to what is,
in our dear broken heart,
is receiving the gift of life from the Spirit that brought us here,
and is what makes healing an art.

Being present with what is,
listening carefully to the heart’s call,
knowing how precious this human life is,
doing our best to receive it all.

Evan Digman
LISTENING: AN ACT OF GRACE

I rushed to my patient’s door and paused, out of breath. Clinical oncology was critically short-staffed. My patient was failing; had I arrived on time? Yes! What a relief to make eye contact.

“Oh, that’s OK, I can see you’re busy,” a weak voice apologized. Puzzled, I looked down. My tired, tense body screamed, “What do you want, hurry it up!”

“You’re right, it has been a crazy busy night,” I admitted. Then, shutting the door, I walked to his bedside. “If it’s all right with you, I’ll get off my feet for a few minutes while you tell me what’s on your mind. Win-win?”

He nodded and looked relieved. First, he expressed gratitude for all that we had done for him. Then he got emotional. Hardly able to speak, he said, “I’m thinking of stopping treatment.”

I sat quietly, listening as this usually stoic patient let go of his dream. “I was hoping for a miracle,” he sobbed, “but I have no quality of life. I’m either sedated, or awake and puking.”

Unable to maintain his composure, this former professor curled up like a little boy. My heart ached as he pleaded for comfort. “I wish…someone…would just…put their arms around me!”

I moved to the edge of the bed, embraced his gaunt frame, and let grief pour out onto my shoulder. It was a moment of grace; one that might have been missed if I had not slowed down… and listened.

Twenty-five years later, a nurse stopped at the threshold of my door. This time I was the cancer patient needing compassion. She made eye contact and paused before entering my sacred space. Then she closed the door and walked towards me… to listen.

It was a full circle moment.

Jane Ellen Nielsen
Sunday, February 21

“Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples.” Isaiah 51:14
LISTENING IN THE LABYRINTH

“Sometimes, we have to stop to change directions.” I was walking a labyrinth on the 4th floor of the Piper Building at Abbott Northwestern Hospital with two chemo treatments behind me and two more to go. Life had been running at breakneck speed when the unwelcome diagnosis of breast cancer stopped me cold in my tracks. I knew I needed to slow down, and now I had no choice. I was stopped. The labyrinth is a circular maze for prayer that twists and turns, guiding the walker into the center and back out again. As I was walking this day, the message from God was very clear. Negotiating the hairpin turns in the path required a full stop to change directions without losing my balance. Cancer and my violent reaction to chemotherapy forced me to change the pace of my life.

I would like to say that once my treatments were completed, I was able to recalibrate my schedule and my pace to reflect the message I heard in the labyrinth. I would like to say I slowed down at last. But listening and putting it into practice are two different things. It took me another two years to say enough and to reduce my workload.

We have all been stopped to a certain degree in the past year due to the pandemic. Early on, many of my friends and I noted how good it was to slow down, to reduce our schedules and obligations. We were forced to stop. Quiet, silence, and rest have come through various forms of isolation. But when the pandemic is behind us, will we truly have changed directions? Or will we ramp up our activities, fill our calendars, and continue our rush through life?

Kathy Michael
LISTENING: A PATH TO HEALING

As a pastor, I’ve done a lot of listening, but never more so than when I served as the interim pastor of a small church shortly after moving to Minnesota.

The congregation was devastated by two successive crises in pastoral leadership. They had divided into factions. Feelings of frustration, anger, guilt, and despair were rife. Worship attendance plummeted. Membership declined. The session felt abandoned by the presbytery. People were in pain. It was a desert, a wilderness. They needed healing.

But they weren’t the only ones. Coming off a frustrating solo pastorate in a distant city, I was discouraged, disappointed, burned out, wounded, even questioning my calling. I was in my own desert, my own wilderness. I needed healing too. I’d had enough of parish ministry, but this church needed someone to help them regain their footing. I was cautious but sensed a calling, so I went.

After we got acquainted, people wanted to talk, and talk they did—over lunch, in my office, during home visits, after worship. They talked, and I listened. It didn’t take long to realize I’d been called to a ministry of listening—to their pain, their heartache, their disappointment, their fear—and in so doing, to help them heal.

But I soon discovered that listening had helped me heal too. It had stitched together the open wounds of my spirit. It had smoothed the jagged edges of my aggravation. It had re-energized my weariness. It had reawakened my passion for ministry.


Listening was a path to healing and renewal, for church and pastor alike.

Thanks be to God!

David Liddle
Anyone who has sung in a church choir for a few years has favorite anthems. One of mine is “Behold, God the Lord Passed By” from Mendelssohn’s oratorio “Elijah”. It hasn’t been sung recently at Westminster, but it tells the story from 1 Kings 19 of Elijah’s encounter with the Lord at Mt. Horeb. The Lord passed by and a mighty wind, an earthquake, and a fire followed, but the Lord was not in any of those, but in a small voice that followed those more dramatic manifestations.

My own encounter with that small voice came a few years ago. I was thinking about worship at Westminster and felt the need for a little something extra. I talked with the appropriate staff about possible ways that need might be met and the necessary commitments required. The commitment was one I felt I could afford and the project got underway. At every step of the way it seemed God was at work; leading us to the right artist and then giving that artist the inspiration. The result was much better than I could have hoped for.

Anyone could have made that donation, but it was my experience of worship at many different churches that led that small voice to speak to me. I give thanks that I was listening when it did. We all have different gifts and that small voice will have different messages for us. We all need to listen for those messages.

David Bowen
Lent Day 7 | Wednesday, February 24

The words you dread but know will come one day: “Mom has died. We’ve made arrangements to gather right away for her memorial service.” In the moment, I only heard Mom’s voice as she always spoke, assuring me everything would be fine, I would be OK. But was it her voice or God trying to soften the grief that might overwhelm me?

Hurriedly, I found myself 35,000 feet above the ground bound for New York, saddened by how dementia-related issues had overtaken a beautiful 84-year life. I prayed for help to ready words of remembrance and looked forward to being with siblings not seen for too long.

Then, God’s hand intervened. Extreme lightning storms closed all New York City airports minutes before the plane was to land. All my other siblings, extended family, and friends had arrived earlier. The plane diverted to an airport that was too far away to drive to the service in time. No choice but to remain on the plane, which returned to Minneapolis. My daughter would say remembrance words on my behalf. As I imagine thousands of families now do, unable to be with dying loved ones due to COVID-19, I asked God, “Why?”

I listened for an answer. Feeling a nudge, I put on earphones and softly played my favorite church hymns, beginning with “For All the Saints.” What I heard in my heart was an admonition that Mom’s spirit, though her body was in New York, was very much here with me above the clouds in the bright sunshine. In silence, unperturbed by the hum of the airplane’s engines, was a calming outpouring of memories of long-ago times. Splashing while washing our dog, kisses for all the ‘boo boos’, vacations to beaches, pride and hugs at graduations, tears and ‘I love yous’ at a failed first marriage. And so many more. Immersed in God’s peace, I was grateful for this private, intimate time to smile, to feel safe, and to honor Mom’s passing. God gave me exactly what I needed.

Ken Huskins
LISTEN

We live surrounded by sound, a base of appliances and devices and traffic and airplanes, layered over by bustle and chat. Everyone is talking, but no one is listening. We are together, but wearing headphones to cancel each other out. What world is this that we live in?

You step out, out into the daylight, out into the park, out into the trees and the grass. Walk away from the traffic and headphones and screens and news cycles. Let your ears open up and your eyes wander off to the sky, the lake, the ground. Sometimes it’s cold, sometimes it’s warm. You might feel the sun’s rays or maybe the soft mist of fog. The evening might slowly darken into stars. But however it is and wherever you are, Nature is there waiting for you, with you. When you still yourself and take a deep breath to really listen, you hear that silent voice. The noisy world fades and you are somehow in a different place.

A bird calls here or there. A squirrel rustles through the leaves. The lake ripples, stirred by wind or fish. Through it all, the trees grow silently taller. How much those trees have seen and heard over the decades, but still they continue to grow, to leaf out freshly every spring in palest greens, keeping the faith. You try to hear them growing, really listening now. Time slows.

Soon enough, distant church bells chime or far-off trains thrum into the edge of your hearing. You walk home, noticing a child playing, a dog barking, or a neighbor saying hello. Someone clanks the mailbox down the street. Back you go to the busy world of sound. But all the while, this other world stays with you.

Listen.

Nan Dreher
“Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.” Jeremiah 32:17

My heart brims over with gratitude (on most days). Yes, even during a pandemic. Towards the top of my gratitude list is what I refer to as God Winks, those places in life where I see, feel or hear God guiding, directing, loving. When my thought is quiet and open to the many wonders of our Creator, I spot God daily in the kindness of people, joyful children playing in fresh snow, blooming apple trees in the spring and the harmony of voices singing out in joy at church.

My mom taught us early on in life that God is always with us and we need only listen for direction whatever the challenge. “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10) is a mantra that I look to for calm and for direction.

Five years ago, I suddenly had to make a job change as I could no longer meet the requirements due to health challenges. I loved my job and my team. I was hurt, angry and sad for over six months. Days after I found out about the change, a dear friend at work, knowing my situation, contacted me because someone in her department had put in their notice and she wanted to offer me the job. Rather than just listening to God’s direction, as this had beautifully fallen into place, I listened to the advice of others and held off accepting the first opportunity, interviewing internally in other departments for six weeks. She held the position. I eventually came around, seeing clearly this was my right place, and accepted the job. I am still working in this role experiencing work-life balance that I have never experienced in past jobs, a wonderful supportive team and challenging work. I learned that if my thought is open I can clearly hear God’s direction.

Wendy Peter Ott
LISTENING WELL TO COMMUNICATE WELL

I was once asked during a job interview what I thought the most important part of communications is. I answered - listening, which surprised the interviewer. I’m not sure what answer she was expecting, but now ten years later, I stand by it: you cannot be a good communicator without listening well. You have to understand correctly what needs to be communicated before you can communicate it well to others, and that entails listening to all voices—not just the loudest ones.

It makes me wonder about my own communications to God. Am I following my own advice? Am I open to listening to the Spirit so I can fully understand my needs and the world’s needs before communicating to God? Am I open to seeing the problem from a different perspective to gain a better understanding?

Recently in my life I had a major job transition that caused me to practice really listening to God. I did not realize it at the time, but I was trying to make work a career path I had designed, when God had an entirely new—and better—path for me. The move from one path to the other was rocky, but once I finally began practicing my own communications advice in my prayer life, I began to hear what God needed to communicate to me. I needed to slow down, spend more time in prayer, and open myself up to trusting God completely.

Almighty God, you proclaim your truth in every age by many voices; we pray for listening ears to hear those voices of truth. We pray for an openness to listen to the Spirit, to fully understand the needs of the world. We pray for a trusting heart in you, God. Amen.

Suzanne McInroy
“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom for the future. The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.” Proverbs 19:20-21
THE SILENCE OF LISTENING PRAYER

“...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak...” Ecclesiastes 3:7b

My first memory of silence is actually one of my earliest memories. I am a small child, there is a gathering from my large extended family at our house, and what I have been experiencing is just hubbub. I am taken aside from that into a familiar lap, to be rocked for my nap. Eyes closed, held in enfolding arms, falling asleep, I pass over into the silent, but singing, presence of my grandmother.

This remembered silence makes me wonder. Is there only going into silence, taking it up as already there? Or, is it a matter of insisting there be silence by making oneself, or another, or everyone, or everything silent?

Maybe not. If I can speak of a “silent, singing presence,” perhaps there is something else going on. When I served an open country church in northeast Kansas, we said of the wheat planted early enough in the fall for it to sprout, then to be nibbled off by the cattle, only to come up again so surprisingly brilliant a color of green in the spring, that it sings!

Ahh, yet there is the keeping of silence. That can be a good thing; what is so good is lost by just chattering away. It can be a bad thing, too, keeping silent when love, or justice, or beauty, or the truth, or even pain demands the power of speech for what must be heard.

Think of silent prayer. Silence is called for in order to listen. God speaks, you and I listen, then in turn you or I speak, God listens. So may it ever be.

Duane Lookingbill
ABOUT LISTENING AND HEALING

I listen for a living. I consider it a sacred calling. When I was nineteen, I began working as a social worker in the Omaha Women’s Job Corps. Every day we were required to meet with our “girls” for a “buzz group.” These meetings allowed the young women to talk about feelings, problems, joys, and sorrows. Weekly listening meetings with each girl were required.

In graduate school counseling courses, I learned many more listening skills. Active listening was my favorite. Again, my job was to listen to clients who were suffering from emotional pain or mental illness. We were just learning about secondary trauma that professional listeners faced. So, we were required to seek out a counselor for ourselves. That was the best advice I had ever received. Someone would listen to me without judging, be fully present and ask pertinent questions.

George, my late husband, and I started The INTER-RACE Institute at Augsburg University in the late eighties. Again, listening to clients was key to our success. We began our work with each new client with deep listening sessions—focus groups, interviews.

Last month, working with a new partner, we have been listening to three focus groups, fifty interviews, in sixteen countries. We have thirty-five more to go. My partner said to me today that she hadn’t realized how exhausting listening could be! We hear many stories, some of them painful.

I know that to do my listening work well, I have to be grounded and centered before I begin.

• I listen to our Westminster Daily phone devotions – 612-332-7087
• I read the daily scripture, devotion, and prayer in “God Pause” from Luther Seminary luthersem.edu/godpause
• I read the Daily Reflections by Presbyterian minister, Glenn McDonald glenn@glennsreflections.com

Join me.

Vivian Jenkins Nelsen
LISTENING POINT

Sigurd Olson named his cabin site, on the edge of the Quetico-Superior outside Ely, Listening Point . . . going there, as he did on his many journeys by canoe into untouched wilderness areas of the North,

— to listen
— to open himself to Oneness, to a sense “that nothing stands alone, that everything is a part of a greater whole” [Listening Point, p. 4].

In The Singing Wilderness, he wrote:

“I once climbed a great ridge called Robinson Peak to watch the sunset and to get a view of the lakes and rivers below. . . . Overall was the silence of the wilderness, that sense of oneness which comes only when we listen with inward ears and see with inward eyes, when we feel and are aware with our entire beings rather than our senses.

I thought as I sat there of the ancient admonition, ‘Be still and know that I am God,’ and knew that without stillness there can be no knowing, without stepping back from outside influences we cannot know what spirit means” [The Singing Wilderness, pp. 130-31].

But the dual lesson that resonates most strongly this day is that true listening is not just hearing but listening with our whole being, and that true listening creates a sense of oneness with the other.

My wish for myself during this Lenten season and hereafter is that any advocacy will begin with and be based on my truly listening to all who may think and feel as I do, to all who think and feel differently, and to all who might seem to be my enemies.

I know that I will fall short, but my hope is that by truly listening, I may feel a greater oneness with others, and with the Other.

Alan Youel
Satahuhsiyost  (Listen Carefully)

Satahuhsatat
Tehsatotat
Yaweluuhati

Atolislatilut  (Breathe in)
Atolislahlek  (Breathe out)
Osk^n^ha k^naheha  (Slowly, a little while)

Satahuhsatat  (Listen!)
Atste ol^na  (Nature humming)
Welyakwnahkwakal  (Heartbeats drumming)
Tshitokw^atabahuhsatoteaka  (People crying, silently)

Shukwayatisu  (Creator)
Seshukwayatakw^  (Redeemer)
Atunhetsla yakunhehk^w^  (Sustainer)

Skwayenawakhutye  (Hold us)
Skwakaleny  (Carry us)
Skwanoluhkwe  (Love us)

Yaweluuhati  (Let it go)
Tehsatotat  (Be still)
Satahuhsatat  (Listen!)

Sheku kyat^ (Hello friend):
I have written this poem for contemplation.
It is written in “ukwehuwehneka” (the Oneida language) with an English translation.
Yaw^ko sk^n^unhot^ (Thanks very much and be well).

Karen Kraemer
On^yoteaka, Waknyaht^ (Oneida Nation, Turtle Clan)
“The Spirit gives us courage...to hear the voices of peoples long silenced.”
*Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.*

No marble, no sparkling fountain, no reflecting pool marked the intersection where George Floyd died. There was only silence. But the silence spoke with power.

In a circle of flowers, we joined mourners who stood, knelt, prayed, wept, or just observed silence. The words, “I can’t breathe,” hung in the air.

The silence spoke. It told stories of slaves bought and sold and families ripped apart. It told of voter suppression and mass incarceration. It told of promises made and promises broken.

Elsewhere in the city, we take our daily walks near our downtown apartment. We overhear conversations, some that could be backyard barbecues. Often we hear raised voices that tell of addiction or mental illness. These are the voices of people who are homeless.

Each person has a story to tell. Do they speak of disability, abuse, or a failed system? I hear echoes of protest, “No justice, no peace.”

On a Saturday afternoon, our phone took us to another neighborhood. “The word on the street is that Black churches will burn tonight.” The voices of hatred have spoken, but in my caller’s voice I hear the power to survive. I hear, “We’re still here”.

Are we listening? Or are we afraid to look deep inside and surrender some of who we think we are? Listening is hard work. It is a spiritual discipline, but the Spirit promises courage.

When we listen, when we hear with our hearts, we will gather in new circles and hear each other’s stories. We will lament the past and ask forgiveness. We will sing and dance and celebrate. When the silence speaks, it will announce a new day. Thanks be to God!

*Bebe Baldwin*
LISTENING ACROSS CULTURES

When I left home in 1966 to go to the Presbyterian Secondary School in Kumba, I was an eleven year old whose prized possessions included:

- The songs I learned in Sunday school notably, “Jesus Loves Me”
- An enshrined chorus, Kumba ya my Lord, Kumba ya, a song that empowered me to believe that one could communicate with God and vocalize what they were feeling—someone’s praying Lord, Kumba ya, someone’s praying Lord, Kumba ya.
- The Holy Bible, a requirement on the list for all students

This is how I arrived, prepared to survive boarding school. That experience shaped my ability to listen with intent. Listening is measured by the impact to the listener. Thirty-five years ago I walked through Westminster’s doors. A friend who had attended the same Presbyterian Secondary School in Kumba invited me to listen to Dr. Meisel’s sermon. I realized how our listening had been shaped by the same stream of consciousness from our humble beginnings. We found ourselves so far from Cameroon, and yet drawn to a familiar presence at Westminster. It was powerful.

What teachings did we receive in Cameroon that made it easy for us to listen to sermons preached at Westminster, holding steadfast to God’s message of love and forgiveness so far away from home?

As Christians, our listening is tied to our interpretation of scripture. During these unprecedented times, with Covid-19 and all the ambiguous losses that have come with this pandemic, our listening has prepared us for many emotions: loss, abandonment, isolation, exhaustion, fatigue, malaise – but, most especially, gratitude.

Listening serves as a protective guard, while believing in God’s promise of unconditional love. Let us all use our gift of listening to embrace change, and celebrate diversity.

Ida Njee
Sunday, March 7

“So faith comes from what is heard, and what I heard comes through the word of Christ.” Romans 10:17
LISTEN TO YOUR LIFE

Recently I’ve been drawn to the work of Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian pastor and writer. As Lent 2021 approaches, two phrases Buechner uses stand out to me: “Listen to your life,” and become “a good steward of your pain.”

Buechner came to these lessons the hard way. Throughout his youth and much of his young adulthood he dealt with deep emotional pain by denying, suppressing, and turning away from it. By fits and starts, though – by actually listening to the story of his life (and by the grace of God) – Buechner came to acknowledge, to own his pains and fears and doubts. He became, as one acquaintance complimented him, “a good steward of your pain” (see Matthew 25:14-30).

I struggled with how to talk about all that in this devotion. Then – the day before the deadline to submit this – I received a message. Out of the blue, a former student [I’ll call her Sarah] wrote. “My journey to detox from a legalistic brand of Christianity that taught me to ‘hustle for my worth’ has been an undertaking of several years.”

In her former church, Sarah explained, she felt intense pressure to be – or at least appear to be – perfectly put together. They “wanted you to have your faith sh*t together so you would look like that shining city on a hill… because nonbelievers are WATCHING you!”

Rather than “hustling” for a sense of worth or worthiness, Sarah is now prayerfully, honestly listening to her life. She is becoming more vulnerable, more truly Sarah. She now feels empowered to explore and build “my own faith story.” And, as she puts it, Sarah is confident that she is “in the hands of a God who hasn’t discarded or given up on me.”

Thanks be to God.

Chad Quaintance
I have never had trouble with solitary silences, particularly during my early adulthood when I lived alone. I spent a year in French-speaking Switzerland during seminary and had a barely-passing grasp of the language, spending long stretches of days in my flat or walking the steep trails speaking to or interacting with few people. Near the end of my year, I spent a week alone in the Engadine, part of the Swiss National Forest. One evening, I sat in a meadow hillside eating a simple supper, grateful for the sore muscles and gift of a long day hiking in the Alps. The Spirit of beauty and joy was within me. Even if I had been surrounded by companions, there would have been no need to speak. It was a reassuring end to the experience of living abroad. I felt filled up with silence. “Be still before God and wait patiently” (Psalm 37).

Days later, on one of my last bus rides through the busy city I had called home for many months, three police officers pulled a teenager without proper fare off the bus. They yanked the boy onto the sidewalk and dealt with him in a manner customary in Swiss culture. It is a considerable offense attempting to ride for free. No French-speaking person on the bus said anything. I did not have the capacity to articulate the shock of seeing a kid handled so aggressively as a matter of public norm. I felt empty, alone, and useless in my silence. “I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse” (Psalm 39).

I have found keeping silence to be holy, significant, and a place to meet God. I have found keeping silence to be dangerous, antithetical to the Gospel, and an obstruction to justice and peace. By listening, and to grow in my faith, I must name that both are part of my relationship to silence.

_Meghan Gage-Finn_
In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, the word for prayer is ‘shela’. It means ‘to open oneself’ or ‘to listen to’.

We listen not only to the Words, but to the silent spaces between the words...from which the words emerge.

LECTIO DIVINA

The ancient practice of praying the Scriptures

THE WORD THAT SPOKE TO THEIR HEARTS

The early monks spoke aloud a passage from scripture they had learned by heart engaging the body in the experience. The monks listened not so much to understand the text — not to conceptualize or analyse it — but just to hear it... so hear it without any preconceived purpose of what they were going to do with it...simply to open.

They allowed the Spirit to chose for them a word, a phrase, or sentence that spoke to their hearts.

This receptive disposition enabled the Holy Spirit to expand their capacity to listen.

Marilyn Youel
I am three, pajamaed and tucked in. My dad bundles me in a quilt and carries me outside. It is bitterly cold. He holds me like a baby and tells me to look up. God’s firmament engulfs us; the stars are embossed in my mind as my Dad whispers how God created them.

I am lying on Grandma’s sleeper sofa. It is summer, the windows are open, bringing in the smells of garden and alfalfa. My head rings with hearing the silence of God’s creation.

Lying on my back under the tall white pine trees; dust and pollen motes are filtering the sunlight into ribbons of gold. A chickadee chicks and dee-dee-dees from above. There is a faint breeze that I feel more than hear. Looking up, I wonder if this is the voice of God.

I feel the rise and fall of the baby’s tiny chest. The dark and quiet of the winter night begs to God for a love-filled healthy future for this small life. Soon I am rocking another in the evenings. Then the third new life is nursing at my breast and the silence is lost. Long days and nights are filled with laughter, tears, joy and pain. Silence for listening answers is found in odd places and in grasping, gasping prayers.

I listen to Him in the silence of stars in winter, in the ringing of noiselessness, in the wind, in tears, in life and in death as I trace life’s path.

_Penny Bratko_
LISTEN

Listen to the children
There are no more school lunches
    and their bellies are empty

Listen to the children
They believe the science
    and fear for the life of our planet

Listen to the children
They know the peaceful future of the nations
    depends on education and literacy for all

Listen to the parents
Their children have been snatched from their arms
    and no one know how to unite the families

Listen to the winds
Hurricane, tornado, firestorm
    tell us the planet is out of balance

Listen to the silence of the desert
Where the treeless land kisses the cloudless sky

Listen to the artists
Who pour out desperation on walls and streets and canvas,
    on stage and street corner,
    in unyielding steel and malleable clay

Listen to the drums
That accompany the Turtle Island Tales
    uniting the physical and the spiritual
Listen to the prophets  
Who point the path to the kindom

Listen to the poet  
Who tells us to “…blow on the coal of the heart” *

Listen to your heart  
Listen with your heart

Listen  
and learn  
and pray  
and act

*Archibald MacLeish, “J.B.”
Listening is an essential act of what it means to be a creature alive on this earth.

When human beings first turned their gift of listening toward one another, they began to form communities. When they turned their listening to the silence of starlit heavens and the wild wind of storm-filled skies, to the rhythms of water rippling and receding, to the sounds of fellow creatures in which they recognized some common source, humankind began to discover a connection with life beyond the material world.

Religion was born in such listening. It will only be sustained by the continuing practice of listening to sounds beyond our own – the “joyful noise” of the psalmist.

As our 18-month old grandchild discovers their own voice in the act of listening to others, it is as if we were witnessing again the first ancient stirrings of our common humanity. What a wonder! It is re-teaching us the same lesson we, too, learned long ago: that in listening to another we find our own voice. Watching this happen rekindles the deep memory of vivid mysteries slowly opening.

True listening requires that we quiet our own voice, at least for a time, and adopt a posture of expectant humility. Our own voice is not the only one in which we might find wisdom. We listen in order to be taken beyond ourselves, willingly, as an act of trust. Perhaps the chief purpose of religion is to launch us on that adventure.

Whatever our concept of the Holy, we form it by listening. That is why our worship includes the reading of ancient words, and silence. To paraphrase the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, to listen is to have faith in things unheard, to trust that we will find hope in sounds beyond our own.

Tim Hart-Andersen
I’m told that hearing is merely registering auditory stimuli, whereas listening involves actively trying to discern a message. Listening is not only mouth-to-ear; the deaf often “listen” with their eyes, and my wife Kate, a physical therapist, “listens” to her patients with her hands. Actions can “speak” more loudly than words.

Like the story about Balaam’s donkey (Numbers 22:21-35), I believe animals can listen for God’s word and speak for God. When birds sing nearby, my old Sheltie-dog Dudley looks at these birds with a twinkle in his eyes, perks up his ears, and relaxes. And when my wife was sad about not being able to embrace her parents this year, Dudley sat on the couch next to her, looked up into her eyes soulfully, and put his paw on her thigh.

Listening to music has been my “Balm in Gilead,” especially during Covid. Kurt Vonnegut once wrote: “If I should ever die, God forbid, let this be my epitaph: The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music… [I]n tough times of my life I can listen to music and it makes such a difference.” Listening to music, and following what seems to be its intrinsic story and emotions, helps me to get in touch with the dream I was raised with, first in the church where I was baptized and now at Westminster: A harmonious world where everyone has enough food and clean water, clothes for the weather, a safe place to live, affordable health care, and companionship. Arthur C. Clarke once said, “Work is the best remedy for any shock,” and, lately, listening with more discipline has helped me to understand others, myself, and the spaces between us better.

Dear God, help me to stop, look, and listen to the myriad ways that you communicate.

Peter Soulen
“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:2
BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD.

We listen, during our hour of need, to the universe as it spins, to the moon as it rises in these dark days, to God in the time of Covid. Listening helps us to find God in the short days and long nights. Listening helps us hear the stories of others who have suffered Covid and got out the other side. Listening helps us hear the transition of Covid survivors from deep, overwhelming despair to optimism and hope.

Listening is often a silent thing—allowing others to pour out their stories as we absorb like sponges, and then echo back what we have heard in order to be clear that we have understood. Covid brings out those stories—stories of fear, stories of hope, stories of experience. These stories cement new relationships; I find that in these times of isolation from physical presence that the phone calls, the Zooms, the passing in the hall of the apartment building, have enhanced existing relationships, and built new ones. Family has attained new importance, and we have reached out as group Zooms to keep us together and not take anything for granted.

Lent is a time of waiting, of giving. We gather with ashes from the palm branches of Palm Sunday, burned to dust, burned to the bronze I imagine Jesus to be after 40 days in the desert, waiting, listening to the Father’s answers for his mission. These are our palms, waving, then burning. This is our Christ, burning and listening, always waiting for us to pierce his palms, and deride him. I want to feel the arid Lent, carry his fast, survive his temptations, that this year I may wave his palms, not burn them.

*Stefanie Hailperin*
LISTENING FOR GOD

It was fall and the day was closing down. The chill that came as the sun set caused me to shiver. The conversation I was having with a friend had ended, good-byes said. That’s when I saw him.

He pushed an old bicycle up the slight incline of the sidewalk. His clothes appeared dirty and old, his hair mussed, a band-aid placed above his left eye. If I could describe hopelessness I would be describing this man. I drove out of the parking lot, looking up and down the street for him, wanting to offer a bit of money. Finally, there he was. I pulled over and called out, “You look like you could use a bowl of hot soup and a cup of coffee.” He looked surprised, took the money and moved on.

I think of him sometimes and other unsheltered people and wonder if God sees us that way: a little lost, injured, sick or feeling lonely and hopeless. The Bible tells us that God seeks us out when we are quiet, when our minds are emptied out enough that God can say, “Look, that man needs a little hope; go give it to him.” It may not be a big thing that I do, but I can offer a meal at Feast, greet a stranger at church, invite someone to Westminster. All these little bits may give hope. After all, God sent us a gift in Jesus: the gift of hope in eternal life.

Prayer: Gracious listening God, give me eyes that see with attention, ears that help me hear the need in another’s voice, a heart that will cause me to take action. Let my whole body listen for your call and may I respond - yes, Lord. Amen

Toni Pendergrast
Lent Day 25 | Wednesday, March 17

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Wait, you may be thinking, “Has David gotten the seasons reversed? We are in Lent and not in Advent!” Hold on. Please allow me to continue.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Yes, you are favored by God! Yes, you, you, and you. The Lord is indeed with you.

You are right that this message is traditionally an Advent greeting from the story of the birth of Jesus foretold. The Angel Gabriel, as the story was told, was sent to Mary, and upon seeing her, he greeted her with this warm and comforting salutation. The angel wanted to make sure that Mary knew how much she was loved and favored by God. Listen for this message of love and acceptance.

In this season of Lent, perhaps this message of being favored by God can be a balm for us. We are favored by God. We are so loved that God sends God’s Son to fully demonstrate and embody God’s unquestioned love for us.

We are favored! This assurance of the revealing presence of God sets the tone for the message of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Listen for this message of transformation.

We are favored! In the midst of uncertainty of what Lent 2021 will hold while the pandemic continues, we know God is with us as the vaccine is being distributed and people are being inoculated. God’s promise of healing and wholeness is upon us. Listen for this message of healing.

We are favored! God has a purpose for us. God has gifted each and every one of us. God’s light in Advent shines brightly in us in this season of Lent. As we pause and walk in repentance, God’s renewal is with us. Our sorrow and our pain will be heard and received by God. Our hope and joy can go forward to share the light with all.

Let us go forth this season knowing we are favored.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

David Shinn
During seminary, my most treasured memories came from the hours I spent in the seminary chapel as part of the Office of Worship Life staff. I loved the brilliance and diversity of our worshiping community, and I loved leading and crafting worship there. But there was one monthly chapel service that I came to dread: the centering prayer service. The centerpiece of these services was the time we spent in silence, sometimes for as long as ten or twelve minutes. I found these services uncomfortable, particularly as someone who tended to fill my ears with music or podcasts during the moments of quiet that I might have otherwise found. Those services forced me into a practice of silence that I had not yet built into my own storehouse of spiritual practices.

Eventually, and very slowly, I came to appreciate these chapel services of centering prayer. I learned from peers who had deep practices of meditative prayer that led them to listen well to the Spirit. I came to recognize the value in spending time listening for God. As a lover of words and music, I learned from the wisdom of Elijah in 1 Kings 19, who came to know God in the still, small voice. I had to listen intently for what God might be imparting in those silent moments. While I would not yet call myself a lover of centering prayer, I would call myself a student of holy silence. God continues to speak in the moments of stillness and calm, and I give thanks for the gifts that some of our more uncomfortable spiritual disciplines can impart. In the practice of listening for God in holy silence, we may find the Spirit guiding us towards practices of listening elsewhere in our lives. This Lent, may we carve out for ourselves spaces of holy silence, of listening for the Spirit’s call to grace and love throughout our lives. Amen.

*Alexandra Mauney*
Dearly Beloved,

Listen to the word of God: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to wrath.” (James 1:19) These words are the foundation for every community and relationship.

I had my first encounter with God in the forest. It was a beautiful day with sun and wind coming through the trees. It felt like the Holy Ghost was there singing, and the voices were loud; I was listening.

My balm of Gilead is to listen, and it represents two things in my life. First - it is the lifeblood in my heart, and second - listening makes me feel included. These two things have healed me many times. One night in my hometown, I watched a person being brutalized. The next morning, I looked for the victim, and I found him broken and disoriented. I listened to him. As I did, we were both made whole.

When you listen to me as I talk about my sweet and better life now, it is the beginning of my healing. When you offer to hear me out, it empowers me with the hope that someone cares. That is my healing. Your presence and your patience to listen deeply and completely is the medicine I need. I believe one’s presence in every conversation is the perfect time to listen and create healing.

The secret is to listen to people until they ask why you care; that is when you can talk sincerely and discover the power of listening with your heart.

Ayuk Ferdinand
LISTEN FOR GOD’S WHISPER

Years ago, I was not a fan of whispering. So, when I started hearing God whisper to me during the summer of 2011, I chose to ignore it.

I had spent 20 years building an international professional career in the performing arts through Broadway, television, and film, and enjoyed New York City as my home base. I was convinced that my urbane Manhattan-centric life was God’s plan.

Then one day my boyfriend (now husband) received a call to lead an opera company in Alaska. It was a dream job filled with discovery and opportunity. He moved to Alaska; I stayed in the big city. I just couldn’t let go of the life I had worked so hard to build. Moving to Alaska was not in my plan. Thankfully, our love grew stronger in bi-coastal commuter mode.

After a few years of commuter relations, we decided to get married. He asked if I would move to Alaska and promised we could leave if I did not like it within a year. I was sure we would be returning to New York City, sooner than later!

Immediately after moving to “The Last Frontier,” I started hearing more whispering from God ... multiple variations of “... trust me. In Alaska, I will expand every area of your life.” The whispers even interrupted my sleep, constantly! Finally, I allowed God’s whisper to override my own. And since that time, I have enjoyed unimagined fulfillment in Alaska and beyond.

God got my attention with Jeremiah 29:11
“I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

I now invoke Divine whispering.
Trust God, especially the whispers!

*Tiffany Cooper-Allen*
Throughout my life I have found comfort in being silent, instead of filling the silence. Silence can be uncomfortable, unsettling, bring waves of anxiety, and darkness. At tender times, silence can be calming, bring comfort, open a time for new thinking, returning memories, or opening for light to enter.

The day my mother died, I started to leave for work very early in the morning. My husband stopped me just before I stepped out the door. He had spoken with my father who told him that my mother had died during the night. I drove to work in a silent fog and got through my task before I told some of my colleagues, and then returned home. At home, I did not turn any lights on, but sat in darkness on the couch with my eyes closed. After a good cry, I thought about the vibrant person my mother was for most of her adult life. The silence was broken by a visiting friend’s hug and our shared cry.

The day I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I hung up the phone, and silently stared into the wall. The silence soon filled with anger, frustration, and fear. I called my husband and then replied to my daughter’s text. I returned to silence again. It felt like one of those “The Great Silence” moments during a Lenten service, only there was no one there to break the silence. My morning was filled with phone calls, texts, and knocks at the door, all telling me I was not alone.

You have to push back really hard against the dark. Reeeaaallllly hard. You cannot let the dark win. Out of darkness there comes a light. Silence is an important practice that then makes room for the light to come in.

*Barbara Thomas*
Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust. Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.” Psalm 143:8
QUESTIONS

“What’s the question behind the question?” my boss used to ask me when I’d stand in her doorway many years ago. I’d often seek her out with what I thought was a quick question, only to receive her question back. The first few times she responded to my question with her question I was irritated. “The question is what I asked you!” I’d respond as politely as any twenty-three-year-old could muster up to her more experienced, but clearly not listening leader. My boss would kindly ask again. “What’s the question behind the question?” I’d pause and then think about it. Usually after my momentary pondering I’d realize there was more to what I was asking; there was a larger issue or question behind it and if I shared it with her she could listen and then potentially respond in a much more helpful way. If I’m being honest, at the time, this realization irritated me as much as her question. But as twenty-seven years have passed since she and I worked together, and I’ve become a leader myself, I’ve come to learn, over and over again, that just because people tell you something, ask you to listen, or provide you a question, it doesn’t mean you understand (or frankly they understand) what they are wanting to say. Listening for understanding requires not just hearing what is being said, but being present enough to ask more. Asking questions helps the speaker and the listener understand each other. The spiritual aspect of question-asking often leads to unexpected and profound moments. As a prayer companion, questions ensure I understand why someone seeks prayer, with the answers often deeper than the initial request.

What questions help you listen for understanding? How is God at work in the questions and the answers?

Ann Rainhart
“LISTEN and gentle be present to all you’ve ever close kept in your loving heart . . .”

My introduction to the music of the Monks of the Weston Priory was in the 70s at my first meditation center retreat. Their album “LISTEN” was newly released. From their webpage (westonpriory.org), I learned this – “Listen with the ear of your heart.” Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue 1.

Listen . . . In the time of Covid, my sense of hearing has been brought farthest to the forefront. I am amazed, not with what I’m hearing, but how I have been existing without hearing at this level!

For example –

- I’m more keenly aware of the sounds of nature. Did you know the bird songs vary even week-to-week? And those frogs with their mating songs in the late spring/early summer – best music ever to lull you to sleep.

- Music – have you noticed how pauses and rests in music are the most poignant part? The spaces between movements of a symphony, when you take a deep breath and integrate what you’ve just heard, elevate my soul.

- My daughter, who is living with me in Covid, got a puppy this summer. The doorbell tinkles every time they go out for a walk, reminding me of life in this puppy-stage of boundless energy and joy.

- I always enjoy my dad’s voice on the other end of the phone sharing his day in Senior Living. At age 94, he still manages to find the good in everything and keeps teaching me how to find it.

“. . .this moment, alive with a stillness, that makes you listen and want to keep listening, and want to keep listening . . .”

May this enhanced gift of listening continue to sustain my life and faith.

Julie Champ
Lent Day 31 | Wednesday, March 24

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down...we wept, when we remembered Zion.
Psalm 137:1

Sometimes I feel like I’m almost done and a long way from home
African American Spiritual

Stony the road we trod / bitter the chastening rod / felt in the days when hope unborn had died J.W. Johnson

When I hear, speak or read the opening verse of Psalm 137 something within me stirs. The same recognition and response happen with the other two portions of poetry shared here. These words summon me into the wide-open space that is lament. Remembrance and re-membering are part of the geography of lamenting. During these times of pandemic, heightened attention to racialized violence and fracturing common life I have often turned toward this soul-mending language.

I grew up in a congregation where we made room for lament. I listened to words of lament from our pastors, in the songs we sang and in the testimony of the people. Sometimes in worship the pastor recited Psalm 137:1 as an introduction to the pastoral prayer. At that point in the service God’s people were invited to come forward, kneel and join hands. We listened and took the psalmist’s lament as our own. The psalmist described the precarious, peculiar but still beautiful experience of being people of African descent living in America.

Memories of our experiences of God’s enduring love and deliverance come to us through lament. When we come through lament, the Spirit reassembles the pieces of who we are. The people who shaped my faith encouraged me to listen to the psalmist’s words and to find my own words to bring before God all that I witnessed in the world—large and small—that threatened me or others in the human family. Before God I am not and we are not forced to set aside our lament.

Alanna Simone Tyler
Anyone who knows me is aware that I have “Mary/Martha issues.” I’m a Martha, focusing on the responsibilities around me and sometimes getting miffed when others show less concern about what I perceive needs to get done (see Luke 10:38).

I could use a dose of Mary, whom I envision with dirty dishes piled high, dust on the clay floor and unrolled sleeping mats flopping in the Galilean wind.

It’s not that I’m a bad listener; in fact, I can be a very good listener. It’s that I don’t often enough stop – just stop – and “sit at the Lord’s feet and listen to what Jesus is saying.”

In our crazy world, the pull to “do” is almost gravitational in its forcefulness. Doing – especially doing well – feeds our cravings and satisfies our desires. We reward people at work, in society and in the news, and we entice people financially and socially. Doing pays.

On their own, my Martha instincts seductively divert me from not doing, from stopping and listening. My ongoing challenge is to find a sisterly amalgamation of doing and not doing. When I experience this balance, I find myself wondering what took me so long to return to the place where God is omnipresent, as if waiting for me to always be present, too. What kind of God is this – always has been, always is, and always will be – present and listening, whether I show up or not?

For Mary, “preparing dinner is not an issue; she’s already at the banquet table.”* When I stop doing and usher myself into the Holy space – where I’m nothing more than the child of God whom God intends me to be – I’m God’s own, and that is sufficient.

*Kathleen Janasz

*Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, Bourgeault, p. 15
LISTENING TOWARD CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

The pervasiveness of systemic racial injustice inspires in me a deep yearning to step forward, raise my voice, and act. But I question: what is my role? How is my voice useful? Take what actions?

Confounded, I resolve, for now, to listen:

I hear Harriet Jacobs speaking of incomprehensible suffering
In her 1861 autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,
Born into chattel slavery, escaping to survive
By hiding, concealed in a minuscule garret, for seven years.

I hear Thurgood Marshall and his NAACP Defense Fund colleagues
Defending, at great personal risk, the Groveland Boys (and far too many others)
Against trumped up charges, corrupt county sheriffs, sham prosecutions, and show trials,
“Lynch law” terror exacted by nightriders to protect power, wealth, and racial pride.

I hear Austin Channing Brown, a contemporary Black writer in today’s America
Reflecting on a legacy of suffering amid persistent racism and insidious white supremacy.
Bequeathed a birthright of ancestral endurance, she clings to the mere “shadow of hope,”
Because hope itself “has died a thousand deaths.”

I hear Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Fannie Lou Hamer, Michelle Alexander, and Bryan Stevenson,
Travel Baldwin’s Beale Street and Whitehead’s Underground Railroad, and
Ponder reparations with Adjoa Aiyetoro, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Eddie Glaude Jr.

I weep at a lamppost in Duluth, and a curbside in Minneapolis.

Paradoxically, perhaps, I listen in hope of understanding suffering I cannot truly understand.
If confession is acknowledgment of sin and repentance is action toward reconciliation, then
listening—essential itself, though inadequate alone—must certainly accompany both.

God, we pray you hear the laments of your people, grant mercy to those afflicted by
oppression and injustice, and grant us the wisdom and courage to secure your vision
of enduring justice for every human being. Amen.

Jeffrey Gram
Lent Day 34 | Saturday, March 27

I love the biblical story of young Samuel when he experiences God calling him in 1 Samuel 3. Samuel is sure he has heard his name, but he does not know who is summoning him or what he should do. He needs his guardian, the priest Eli, to instruct him to acknowledge God and then to listen. As a result Samuel eventually finds himself caught up to play important roles in God’s commitment to reshape a nation and its people.

Samuel, with Eli’s help, has to will himself to listen. The divine voice does not force itself upon him; Samuel must open himself up to hear. I can relate. So often I tune others out because I think I already know what they will say—that it will be a predictable refrain or uninteresting chatter. If I’m not attentive, worship and Bible reading can have the same dull or minimal effects. I can make myself impervious to other words, needs, and perspectives.

Who is it who encourages you to be still and to listen, whether to God or to others? What is it in your schedule, routine, or spiritual practices that reminds you that you will miss something from God or from other people (or from both at the same time) if you do not make yourself not only still and alert, but expectant?

We might sense God’s voice in any number of ways. The same is true with the sense of being nudged to get involved in pursuits that will let us experience God’s justice and mercy at work. Eli and Samuel don’t have a sure-fire method for sensing these things, and neither do I. It’s a good thing we have others to help us listen. And a good thing that God keeps on calling.

_Matt Skinner_
Palm Sunday, March 28

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Psalm 119:105

Gleanings, by Lucy Rose Fischer, watercolor illustration, 2012
LISTENING FOR THE VOICE OF GOD

Certainly, there are many ways to listen for the Voice of God. As people differ, so do situations, needs, and approaches. For me, preparation is an essential starting point. Listening requires interior and exterior quiet. Purposefully asking for the gift of hearing grounds me and reminds me that God is always present, even when I am not able to hear His voice.

When and where possible, I sit comfortably in a chair or on the floor, close my eyes, and bring my attention to my breath, to my breathing. This action alone relaxes and grounds me. Then I take a few moments to focus patiently and gently on my forehead, my eyes, ears, jaw, throat, and shoulders. Soften. Soften. Soften. Let go. Let go. Let go. I try not to hurry - the Spirit is in no hurry. Allow God to speak. Let me listen. In this setting, His voice may become more audible. I may begin to hear His message.

I give thanks to God for being present to me in this time of listening.

Other ways of listening for the Voice of God might be to sit quietly and repeat one of the following:

- Listen, listen, wait in silence listening for the One from whom all mercies flow.
- Be still and know that I am God.
- There is nothing that so resembles God as silence.

Mary Adams
If you ask my family, they will say that for a very long time the only person I listened to was myself ... my thoughts, my way, my plans, my thoughts on your way!

Life happened, of course. Trials and tribulations, such as the premature death of twins, the death of my husband, twelve plus years of working seven days a week to support my young son and myself, brought about a change. Over time I began to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit to show me God’s way, God’s will—not mine.

Why the change? Over those years, I saw that God had answered my self-serving prayers but not in the way I had hoped or expected. He answered with His perfect plan, far better than anything I had thought of. His message to me was to seek Him, listen for His voice and trust Him.

On September 29, 2017, the Holy Spirit “spoke” to me ... “move to Minneapolis.” My first reaction was not to doubt the source, but to respond with, “but I don’t do cold,” followed quickly with my prayer that God’s will be done. Whenever a seeming hurdle arose to the work needing to be done to bring about the move, I turned it over to God. Fifty-nine days later, I was sitting in my new home in Eden Prairie. My home in North Carolina sold in two days. My employer obtained an office for me in Minneapolis. God’s will was done.

My heart’s desire is to be in the center of God’s will for me, to listen for His direction, to be of utmost service according to His pleasure.

With a grateful heart,

Barbara Guth
Recently, I was reminded of the simplicity of Christ-like listening by a quote from Mister Rogers:

“"You’ve made this day a special day, by just your being you. There’s no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are.”

Mister Rogers had a unique way of slowing down and connecting to viewers and guests on his show. As a young child, I was not always sure what to make of this, because I knew he couldn’t actually see me or hear any answer I might give back to the tv. Still, I felt the warmth of his positive words and was calmed by his on-screen persona. These things made me feel that if I were in the room with him, that he would care about me personally, and that he would take time to talk with me. More importantly, I felt he would listen to what I had to say. In this disconnected way, Mr. Rogers had the ability to make people feel listened to and cared for.

Many of us know that Fred Rogers drew his inspiration from the teachings of Christ, who embodied the art of listening. Jesus did this not only through His life and teachings, like when He listened to the woman at the well (John 4:4-42) and stopped everything for the woman who touched His cloak (Mark 5:24-34) but also in His death, through listening to His heavenly Father (Mark 1:35). He showed how much He cared for people with His listening, and in the end, He fully emptied Himself on the cross, out of love for us. If we are to find a sacred path of listening, we must be prepared to care enough for others that we empty ourselves as well.

Let us envision the qualities of Christ, or even Mister Rogers, as we enter into the act of listening. Let us quiet our minds, stop what we are doing, and be fully present with one another. We do not build trusting, caring relationships by offering advice or by planning what to say next. We show that we care for others by taking the time to slow down and be present with people. We don’t have to have all the answers. It is enough to sit with another person and just fully listen.

*Mahin Hamilton*
LISTENING AFTER GEORGE FLOYD DIED

I like to think I am a progressive, caring person – and maybe I am. But what I have learned since George Floyd died is that listening – really listening - to the stories of individuals who look different from me or believe in different things than I do opens me to the possibility and mind-bending reality of truly understanding human experience beyond what is familiar to me. It is changing my life.

Why am I more ready now to listen? Because I have finally aged into wisdom? Because Covid-19 restrictions give me more time to read and reflect? Because I am making more effort to understand white privilege and systemic racial injustice? The catalyst for me was the haunting plea George Floyd made, “I can’t breathe!” As we heard that plea and saw it in hashtags and headlines over and over, I began to wonder who else can’t breathe? Who else had I talked to, worked with, sat next to on a park bench, passed on the sidewalk, or seen on the news was struggling to take a free breath as a human being because of the way my culture, city, and country operates?

When I risk asking an acquaintance how they are influenced by a book like Girl, Woman, Other, or how their children are experiencing the fear of not being included during Covid-19 distancing, I am often blessed by a rich story that helps me see their reality. When I risk asking the appliance repairman, the Uber driver, or cleaning staff what they think is the most important step for the city to take, sometimes I have the opportunity to step into a completely different perspective. I don’t know where this listening will take me, but it is challenging me to really see all of God’s children.

Carol Vantine
LISTENING

For the occasion of Lent in the Christian Church

Listening – How important this is to facilitate communication. As a trained Clinical Social Worker, I was schooled in the art of listening and how to interpret this for the benefit of the client. It was only through careful listening that we could begin to understand either the joy or the pain that our clients were living with.

This also holds true with the collective listening of a group in the process of aiding a community. An example of this stands out in my mind as a time when collective listening went awry. Early in our marriage, Nancy and I belonged to a “House Church”, avoiding all of the trappings of the established “Cathedral” churches. Our mission led us to the impoverished parts of town where we partnered with a small Black church. In our zeal, we took on what we considered the deficits of the community and petitioned for street repair, police protection and improved housing.

Our meetings were congenial, generally meeting in the backyard of one of the Black church members where we talked and were served lemonade. As a Christian body, we were quite proud of ourselves for the efforts that we were making, as believers who were working in the spirit of the risen Christ.

There was only one problem. As we began to see movement in the bureaucratic structure of the city, we felt the need to step back and allow community members to follow through. It was at this time that we discovered, to our dismay, that we had no basis for trust and were seen as another “do good-er” organization who would abandon them as soon as we felt satisfaction in our efforts.

So, if you are listening, be sure to set aside any preconceived thoughts of what you are hearing.

Gerald C. “Jerry” Rekow
LISTENING TO GRIEF

During my years with the Downtown Coalition for Grief Support I have learned many things — but the most important is listening. I think the following thoughts — as expressed from the viewpoint of the bereaved — most accurately reflect the profound response to a friend who listens.

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice, you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn’t feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I ask is that you listen. Don’t talk or do – just hear me....

And I can do for myself; I am not helpless. Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can stop trying to convince you and get about this business of understanding what’s behind this irrational feeling.

And when that’s clear, the answers are obvious and I don’t need advice. Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what’s behind them.

Perhaps that’s why prayer works...because God is mute, and he doesn’t give advice or try to fix things. God just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.

So please listen, and just hear me. And if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn – and I will listen to you.

Leo Buscagli

Mary Johnson
Calvary: when Darkness Surrounds You, ther is Hope in the Light, by Connie Scott, watercolor on paper, 2016
Contemplation, by unknown artist, etching with aquatint, n.d.
To Believe in God, by Sister Corita Kent, silkscreen, 1960s

All art within this Lenten booklet is from The Westminster Collection.