

Northwestern Ohio Synod

Year of Listening

Bible Study

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so
that you may live...”*

Isaiah 55:3a

Dear Friends in Christ,

Welcome to **2025: The Year of Listening**. Our focus in 2025 is to learn the sacred art of listening. Listening to God. Listening to Ourselves. Listening to Others. And Listening to the Community.

In Isaiah 55, the prophet invites God's people to listen: ***"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live..."*** (Isaiah 55:3a). Isaiah extends this invitation to a people who are living in Exile. This is a people living without hope. But even to those suffering in far-away land, Isaiah offers the promise of hope and restoration. God invites the exiles to ***"Come to the waters... Come to the banquet... Come to me... and listen, so that you may live..."***

God's invitation to listen is a gift that permeates the Scriptures. From the Shema, ***"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might"*** (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). To the Psalms, ***"Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer"*** (Psalm 61:1). To the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, ***"Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock"*** (Matthew 7:24). To the words the Exalted Jesus repeats to the seven churches in Revelation, ***"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches"*** (Revelation 2-3). God longs for us to hear, so God invites us to listen.

What follows is an eight-session Bible resource created by the Northwestern Ohio Synod staff that invites you to listen. Open (or turn on) your Bible, gather with a group of friends, get outside the four walls of the congregation, and together, learn to listen to God, listen to ourselves, listen to others, and listen to the community.

"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live..." (Isaiah 54:3a).

Blessings,



Bishop Daniel G. Beaudoin
Season of Advent 2024

In preparation for this year's Bible Study, we want to introduce four primary facets or types of listening that our scripture study will help us experience: 1. Listening to God, 2. Listening to Self, 3. Listening to Each Other, and 4. Listening to the Community. Here's a quick explanation of each:

Listening to God: is to daily consider and acknowledge God's everlasting love for us, to quiet ourselves to pay attention to what God says to us individually and collectively, recognize God's great power, trust God's guidance, and follow God's instructions. God, in Christ Jesus, is continually seeking to be in relationship with us, loving us and guiding us, but if we're not listening, we miss God's presence, connection and constructive guidance that is available to us for the living of these days.

Listening to Self: is our own God-given intuition & emotional/mental/spiritual health, balance and state of being. The complexity of this gift allows us to understand ourselves, our gifts, our challenges, our communication styles, and become aware of how our life experiences influence our actions and decisions, interactions and relationships. When we are listening and "in tune" with where we are spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally, we can most effectively and efficiently communicate, listen, and be in relationship with others.

Listening to Each Other: Listening is a verb, it is active. Are we listening to respond or are we listening to understand more about the person speaking and to understand their wellbeing? What we hear, what we say and how we say things to each other is influenced by our ability to listen to what the other is really saying. Hearing and listening are two different things. How we experience listening and being heard, and how we do that for others shapes a conversation. *Listening* is anything but passive; it is very dynamic and very powerful in shaping conversations, our communication and thus our relationships with each other.

Listening to Community: Listening to the wider community is a call to understand our neighbors and how our relationship with each other influences culture and our collective relationship on a wider level. As a member of a Christian community which reflects the love of Jesus, we are called into relationship with the community around us. As Jesus spent time with and listened to the people around him, so we are to listen and understand as best we can the pain points of the community, what others experience, and to enter into relationship compassionately with those around us, those we are called to serve. We do that best by listening.

We are very excited about this Bible Study and the impact it can have on all of us...THANK YOU for participating in this journey of Listening.

Week 1

Why Listening?

By: Deacon Sherry Krieger

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so that
you may live...”
Isaiah 55:3a*

Week 1: Why Listening?

Memory Verse (repeat aloud together)

Isaiah 55:3 a: *Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.*

Opening Prayer

Listening God, unclutter our hearts and minds from the business and worries of the day so that we can quiet ourselves enough to hear you. Come Lord Jesus, speak to us. Come Holy Spirit and help us in these few moments of silence to still ourselves, to stop, to listen, to wait and allow your presence to envelop us in your presence, your compassion, your grace and your all-embracing love. Hear our yearning and let us hear you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Icebreaker

Each participant shares a short story or personal anecdote with the group about where they saw God this past week. Depending on group size – be respectful of length and details of stories of God-sightings. Add this twist: after each story, the group must pause in silence for 20 seconds (set a timer) to reflect before responding or asking questions. This practice helps develop patience and gives space for more thoughtful responses.

Why Listening?

This Year of Listening, 2025 is a natural yet significant follow up to the Year of Rest, 2024 that we have just completed. As a quick reminder, the 7 types of Active Rest are: Spiritual, Mental, Emotional, Social, Creative, Physical and Sensory. Check out resources on the synod website at www.nwos-elca.org if you are interested or want a refresher. Two of the most important aspects of how Active Rest influences our whole being is: 1. the importance of listening to our body, mind, and spirit, and 2. the significance of looking critically (meaning realistically, honestly) at our relationships, how we spend our time, how we spend our money, etc. because all of these insights show us and reflect back to us what is *really* important and what influences us most as we live and interact with those around us. Just as *Rest is a choice...* so is Listening! *Listening is a Choice.* Good communication skills are fundamental to all relationships and *listening* is a key skill, that can be learned, for effective communication with others. How we communicate our thoughts and feelings to others and how we hear, accept and listen to others' expressions of feelings and thoughts to us, as well as, how we manage differences reflect the

quality of our relationship with God, with ourselves, with others, and with the community in which we live. Listening is a vital activity and skill that when built and flexed well allows us to live our best lives, to be in full relationship with God, self, and others, and is the fundamental way we SHOW our friends, family, neighbors and strangers that we love them. It has been said, “the experience of being listened to is so close to the experience of being loved as to be indistinguishable.” (Sara Savage, Cambridge University research psychologist).

Certainly, we all know what it feels like NOT to be listened to, and undoubtedly, others have accused every one of us at some point of having *not* listened to them. Let's begin with our own experiences:

Take a moment to think about a time when a person in your life, maybe your child(ren) (biological, adopted, nieces, nephews, students), your partner, spouse, grandparent, family member, neighbor, the cashier at the grocery store, or your doctor didn't listen to what you were saying or trying to tell them. What did they do? How did not being listened to make you feel? Did anyone get hurt?

Take a moment to think about a time when a person in your life, maybe your child(ren) (biological, adopted, nieces, nephews, students), your partner, spouse, grandparent, family member, neighbor, the cashier at the grocery store, or your doctor accused you of not listening to them. How did they know you weren't listening? What did they do? What did they say to you? How did this experience make them feel? Did anyone get hurt?

Take a moment to think about a time when you didn't listen to your body. What happened? Did you get sick? Did you get hurt? Did you gain or lose weight without intention? How did your body respond to not being listened to?

Take a moment to think about a time when you wrestled with listening to God. What happened? How did you feel? What was the resolution to this experience?

If you're like me, these are fairly easy incidents to think about.

But now, take a moment and think about a person or a situation you experienced where you felt very heard, understood, listened to. You knew that person listened to you and understood what you were expressing and/or experiencing. Who is that person for you? What did they do that made you feel listened to? Write down the characteristics of that person, the incident and how being listened to made you feel.

If you are comfortable, share your stories with each other in the group. If you prefer, take the next 10 minutes to write down your answers in a journal and flesh out the story(ies) to yourself so you have full understanding of each of these listening experiences. Share with the group what your reflection time revealed to you, and how you felt going through this process. For you see, much of the action of listening has to do with our emotions and our behaviors, as well as, the emotions and behaviors of others in our life.

Let's Delve In...

The first two chapters of the study are going to offer a more in-depth look at the Year of Listening's four primary facets of listening: 1. Listening to God, 2. Listening to Self, 3. Listening to Each Other, and 4. Listening to the Community. If you wish, take a moment to re-read the explanation of each type of listening on page 3 and discuss as a group.

Do you have questions about any of the 4 areas of listening? Have you experienced each type of listening yourself? Share as you feel comfortable – both struggles and successes.

Listening to God

What is your favorite Bible Story about someone Listening to God? Share your ideas with the group.

Noah, Moses, Mary and Joseph were certainly some scriptural icons who listened well to God. However, no one personified this ability better than Jesus. His habits, his activity and his teachings exemplify the importance of taking time to listen and be connected to God, and he even shows us how to do it!

Luke 22:39 - 43: "Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him."

Time and time again, we see Jesus withdrawing to pray, gain connection with God and Listen to his Father. For more Jesus-listening-to-God stories check out Matthew 14:13-14, 22-23; Luke 9:28 – 30; Luke 11:1-2; Mark 6:30-32.

Listening to God and Listening for God's voice is not easy. It takes discipline, as Jesus shows us in Luke 22:39 "Jesus went out as usual" to pray. It was his habit. Listening to God takes time, it requires quieting or calming our minds and hearts, and it takes giving all of our attention so that we can really listen, hear and comprehend God's movement and will. But the benefits are manifold, as the passage tells us, Jesus gained strength for decision-making, for ministry, for life, and in this case, Luke 22:42, for giving his life.

Discussion Questions

How do you sense God's presence? How do you listen to God/God's voice or inspiration? Do you have a practice or a habit that helps you calm yourself and/or have time with God that you can share with the group? If so, please do.

What might you do this week to grab a moment with God everyday in quiet anticipation of listening for God's voice?

Closing Prayer and Blessing

Resting in you, Oh Lord, I remember myself, and in so doing, I remember you. In this busy world, it is easy to forget. Today, I wish to rise in remembrance, receiving knowledge and wisdom in my heart. Although there appear to be many paths for my life, I feel drawn to this path of quietness in gentleness and surrender. Solitary in silence, you kiss my soul, and I feel more alive. Amen

(Peter Traven Haas, Center Prayers: A One-Year Daily Companion for Going Deeper into the Love of God)

A Blessing for your Week

May today there be peace within.
May you trust God that you are exactly
where you are meant to be.
May you not forget the infinite possibilities
that are born of faith.
May you use those gifts that you have received,
and pass on the love that has been given to you.
May you be confident knowing you are a child of God.
Let this presence settle into your bones,
and allow your soul the freedom to
sing, dance, praise and love.

~attributed to St. Therese of Lisieux and St. Theresa of Avila

Resources

Apps:

- Centering Prayer
- The Pause App (30 Days to Resilient and the One Minute Pause)
- Pray as you Go
- Abide

Book: *Listen! God is Calling! Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith and Work* by
D. Michael Bennethum

Song: *You Say* by Lauren Daigle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slaT8Jl2zpl>

Week 2

Digging Into Listening

By: Deacon Sherry Krieger

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so
that you may live...”
Isaiah 55:3a*

Week 2: Digging into Listening

Opening Prayer

Listening God, unclutter our hearts and minds from the business and worries of the day so that we can quiet ourselves enough to hear you. Come Lord Jesus, speak to us. Come Holy Spirit and help us in these few moments of silence to still ourselves, to stop, to listen, to wait and allow your presence to envelop us in your presence, your compassion, your grace and your all-embracing love. Hear our yearning and let us hear you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Memory Verse (repeat aloud together)

Isaiah 55:3 a: *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live..."*

Icebreaker

Reflect on and share about "listening" during this past week. Did you, and if so, how did you take time to hear God's voice? Was it easy? What did you find challenging? Share as you are able with your group mates.

Listening to Self

Think of some Bible stories about people listening, not listening or understanding/not understanding their behaviors or response to God's calling in light of their life experiences.

This aspect of Listening to Self is about understanding one's life experiences, personality, and unique characteristics, in order to understand how we communicate, to be aware of what triggers us, but also to identify our growth edges and/or what we can learn in order to become better listeners.

Certainly, Moses and the Exodus story provides us with various insights into the complexity of understanding ourselves, our behaviors and this aspect of listening. Moses attempted to get out of being God's spokesperson because he felt he wasn't a good public speaker. In Exodus 4:10 he tells God, *"O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."* That's pretty insightful on Moses' part, but what we learn is that God sometimes has other ideas and our own self-understanding no longer becomes inhibiting for us but is overcome by God's power, and what we see as weakness becomes God's strength.

Even more poignantly, the Exodus story gives us a broader insight into this concept of knowing ourselves and how it affects how we listen. In Exodus 6:9 we read: *"And Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they would not listen to Moses because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery."* Here we see how life experiences affect the Israelite's ability to listen. Their spirit had been broken to the point that they did not have the ability to listen or respond appropriately to God's mighty works, direction or the very presence of God among them. As we know, the Israelite's wilderness experience takes 40 years of an on-going cycle of God and Moses interacting with the people, teaching and directing them, repeating over and over and over again the covenantal relationship and love of God until the people trust. In fact, it takes a new generation of Israelites to be able to break free, listen, and move whole-heartedly into a new world, the promised land.

Our Rabbi, Jesus, also gives us insight into the importance of the interconnectedness of ourselves and our relationship with others. When asked which is the greatest commandment (the laws that help to govern our behaviors and our relationship with God and others), Jesus actually drills down to the very heart of what we're talking about in Matthew 22: 37-40: *"He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

Listening and loving are almost indistinguishable. So, understanding ourselves in order to better communicate with others, shows our love for the other and helps us to live out this great commandment.

Discussion Questions

What are some topics or things that you find very hard to talk about with others? What about those topics bother you? How might it relate to one or more of your life experiences, a personality trait or personal preference or belief? There is **NO** judgment here. Just self-reflection. We can only get better at listening when we understand ourselves better. In what situations do you find yourself having a hard time communicating? Reflect and do some self-evaluation related to your ability to listen to yourself and how you communicate with others. Journal or talk to a trusted friend or colleague about what you have learned about yourself.

What might you do this week for self-care? Take some time and do something special for yourself – take a walk, visit a friend, paint a picture, eat some ice cream, or journal and talk with God.

Listening to Each Other

Listening to each other is a key component of life. We were not born into isolation, we were born into community, into family, into relationship with others. And we, too, extend ourselves in relationship with others as we live, work, go to school, play, worship and walk daily encountering people around us.

What are some stories you can name where Jesus interacts with and listens to others?

Mary, Martha and Lazarus might come to mind; Jesus heard the fear and concern in the Centurion's voice as he approached Jesus about his sick servant; Jesus communicated well with the woman at the well; and Jesus listened and responded to the needs of a hungry community who were following and listening to him. He fed them both spiritually and physically. What are some others you can think of?

There's another great Exodus story that helps us here. Listening to each other is exemplified in the exchange between Moses and his father-in-law Jethro. Read Exodus 18:13-24 for the full story. Here's a synopsis:

13 "The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning till evening...¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You will surely wear yourself out...the task is too heavy for you...You should look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy... ²³ If you do this, and God so commands, you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace."²⁴ Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said."

Listening to each other is a skill that, when implemented well, allows us to give and take in our communication with another person or persons. It is entering into conversation where there is the mutual sharing of thoughts and feelings, and an attempt to gain understanding whether we agree with each other or not. Listening to each other takes courage because we may not always like what we hear. I think Moses was a bit stunned by Jethro's bluntness about Moses' leadership and his current way of doing things. And yet, because of wisdom, trust and mutual respect, Jethro and Moses came to an understanding and Moses' leadership style was changed forever. Because he listened to Jethro's wise counsel, Moses was better able assist to the people of Israel through 40 years of a difficult and challenging experience.

Discussion Questions

Who has listened well to you? What did they do to make you feel listened to? What characteristics of that person are most important to you?

Who comes to you with their “stuff” of life, and invite you *listen* to them? What do you do to make them feel listened to?

If you struggle with wanting to respond right away to things you hear, make a point to practice listening just to listen and not respond (or not respond until asked). Do you see a difference in how your conversation goes? What did you notice as you practiced this skill?

You may ask a person wishing to talk with you, *“what do you need from me in this conversation? Do you just want me to listen? Do you seek advice? I want to be as helpful as possible, so please let me know what you need...”*

Journal your experiences.

Listening to the Community

Why do we listen to the community? We listen to others, our neighbors, and the community because Jesus requests us to be in relationship with others. He gives us the Great Commission, Matthew 28:16-20: *“Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...And Jesus details his and our “job description” for ministry in Luke 4:18-19: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

For Jesus, mission and ministry was and is interconnected with those around him, especially those who are hurting. For us, our mission and ministry is interconnected with our neighbors, those who live, work and play in the communities around us, the wider community in which we live. When we listen to the community, we hear the needs of those around us, inside a parish, as well as our neighbors who live around our church building or in the neighborhoods where we live. Listening to the community helps us determine our mission and where God is calling us into service. Listening to the community helps us understand what God is calling us to do, who God is calling us to serve, how we can help heal their hurts, share the love of Jesus in new ways, and with whom God is calling us to develop relationships. Listening to community is a skill that can be learned through prayer walking or community organizing.

The disciples of the first church learned this pointedly in the story of those they heard were being neglected. This story is shared in Acts 6:1-7: *"Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."*

The disciples heard the critique and the need for the assistance of the widows who were being neglected and they figured out a way to meet that need while also continuing to minister in the way they were called.

Discussion Questions

Discuss how your worshiping community lives out the great commission or the "job description" Jesus refers to in the Luke passage. What do you think "freeing the captives" might mean for us as followers of Jesus? What do you think Jesus wants us to do for those who are suffering? How does your parish minister to and with people who may not be members but are living in the neighborhood of your church building.

What might you do this week to listen to someone you don't know, to try and understand their needs?

We've covered a lot! Take some time to breath, think and reflect. This is a journey that we're taking together. Be at peace and know that we are all learning how to better listen...Listen to God, to Self, to Each Other and Listen to the Community.

Closing Prayer

Into your hands, almighty God, we place ourselves: our minds to know you, our ears to listen to you, our hearts to love you, and our will to serve you, for we are yours. Into your hands, incarnate Savior, we place ourselves: receive us and draw us after you, that we may follow in your steps, live and listen like you have taught us, abide in us and enliven us by the power of your indwelling. Into your hands, O hovering and Holy Spirit, we place ourselves, take us and fashion us after your image; let your comfort strengthen, your inspiration motivate, your grace renew, and your fire cleanse us fully, body and soul, in life and in death, in this world of shadow and challenge and in your changeless world of light eternal, now and forever. Amen.

Resources

Video: The Art of Listening introductory video by Simon Sinek:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=qpnNsSyDw-g&t=6>

Books:

- *Getting to Yes* by Roger Fisher & William Yuri
- *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, Foreword by Roger Fisher

Week 3

Shiphrah Puah

By: Pastor Sarah Schaaf

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so that
you may live...”
Isaiah 55:3a*

Week 3: Shiphrah Puah

They Said No, By Lisle Gwynn Garrity © A Sanctified Art

Memory Verse (repeat aloud together)

Isaiah 55:3a *“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live...”*

Opening Prayer

*(Collect prayer petitions from the group for **distractions in our lives** and **vulnerable people or groups**.)*

Gracious God,

Open our hearts to you and the call you place on our lives. Quiet the things that distract and draw us away from you. Things like: (offer petitions for specific distractions in your life). Incline our ears to the needs of our neighbors, particularly those who are most vulnerable. People like: (offer petitions for specific people or groups you know). Give us companionship as we steward the work you have placed before us, in Jesus’s name. Amen.

Icebreaker

Reflect on your week, did you have an opportunity to listen to someone you did not know? Did you try to understand their point of view or needs? How did that feel for them? What did you notice? How did it feel for you? What did you learn? Share your experience with the group as you are comfortable.

Scripture Passage

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live. ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. (Ex 1:8-21)

Reflection

"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live..." Isaiah 55:3a

I had to travel all the way to Wittenberg, Germany to hear the story of Shiphrah and Puah for the first time. I am certain I must have read it before, but I had not heard it. Perhaps my ears were not inclined. But in Germany, I found myself around a table with women from all over Europe; from Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, and Romania.

We spoke different languages. We were young in leadership in the church. Most of us served in places that the others had never even heard of. In Wittenberg we ate together and learned together. We worshipped together and we drank German beer together. We shared stories of our homelands and pictures of our children. Every night we lifted up the Lord's Prayer, each in our own language. The prayer seemed to dance on my eardrums. Somewhere along the way, my ears were inclined toward a new message God had for me.

At the end of the week when Pastor Anna from Serbia told us the story of Shiphrah and Puah, the feisty midwives who would not abandon their vocation to deliver life, I was finally able to listen. Anna stood before us and said, "Shiphrah and Puah's story will continue to be told; as a brief footnote perhaps, but their name will be recorded for all of eternity. And if you have ever wondered if what you do matters, these midwives answer a resounding, 'Yes!'"

Ever since that day Shiphrah and Puah have been in my ears. Sometimes I feel like they flank me on each side whispering...making sure my ears stay inclined towards God's message to me. I will be honest, they can be troublesome company. Not because they ask me to do anything extraordinary, but because they will not allow me to abandon my vocation as a fellow "midwife". "Your call is to bear life", they say. "It is not yours to determine where the Holy Spirit will take each life, but you have a job to do Sarah. So do it!"

When have you had your ears attuned to a new message from God? What did you hear?

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (v. 8). It is such a menacing statement. This king looks at the growing number of Israelites in the community with fear and suspicion. He sets taskmasters over the Israelites to beat them down; but the more they are oppressed, the more the Israelite families grew. As the Israelite families grew, the more fearful Pharaoh became. Finally, Pharaoh comes up with a plan, he commands Shiphrah and Puah to suffocate all the Israelite boys while their mothers are giving birth, thus making them believe their children are stillborn. It is important to understand that Pharaoh is not just trying to control the number of Israelites in his community, but the capacity of a people to hope.

Shiphrah and Puah's are midwives. Their calling is to bear life. Pharaoh's mandate to them is to destroy life. **Who do Shiphrah & Puah listen to? Who do they tune out? How do you decide to whom you listen?**

The midwives chose to act as though Pharaoh is not the highest authority in their lives. Their obedience looks like disobedience. Not only did they defy Pharaoh's command, but they came up with a clever lie about it. They knew the women they served. They had spent a lifetime accompanying these women through childbirth. They also knew that Pharaoh had no understanding of the world in which they operated, so they insisted, "the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous (or full of life) and give birth before the midwife comes to them" (vs. 19). Their lie allowed them to continue to fulfill their vocation as midwives and welcome many more children into the world. **Are there times when your values rub up against each other? How do you decide who or what to be faithful to?**

Many different voices make demands on Shiphrah and Puah's lives, but together they discern which voices to incline their ears to. I wonder if they would have had the courage to stand up to Pharaoh alone. **Who helps you stay faithful to who you are meant to be?**

It is a risky endeavor for these two women, but is faithful to the call God has placed on their lives. Their actions remain attuned to the needs of their community. The blessing their faithfulness ushers in is children. God blesses their call. "And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families" (vs. 21).

Some biblical figures keep a low profile. Shiphrah and Puah would qualify in this group. We all remember Moses as the great deliverer, but behind Moses stands five women who delivered him (see Exodus chapter 1). That was only possible because they stewarded their own power and vocation to fulfill God's purpose. **What is your midwifery (your work that fosters life)? This may or may not be your job or career.**

Closing Prayer

Fierce Blessing – Jan Richardson

*Believe me when I say
there is nothing
this blessing would not
do
to protect you
to save you
to encompass you.*

*This blessing
would stand between
you
and every danger,
every evil,
every harm
and hurt.*

*This blessing
would dare
to wade with you
into the waters that*

*come
bearing life.*

*It would make
a way for you
through the waters
that come
threatening death.*

*I cannot explain
how fierce
this blessing feels
about you
but I can tell you
it has more than
pledged
itself to you;
it would lay down
its life for you
and not once
look back in regret
nor go in sorrow*

*for what it has chosen
to give.*

*And you—
so deeply blessed,
so utterly
encompassed—
what will you save
in turn?*

*Not because
it is owed
but because
you cannot imagine
failing to pass along
this grace
that casts its circle
so wide,
this love
that flows
so deep
through this perilous
and precious life.*

Go and Do

This week be intentional about who or what you incline your ears to hear. What criteria will you use to decide who you listen to? Who might you tune out to be faithful to God?

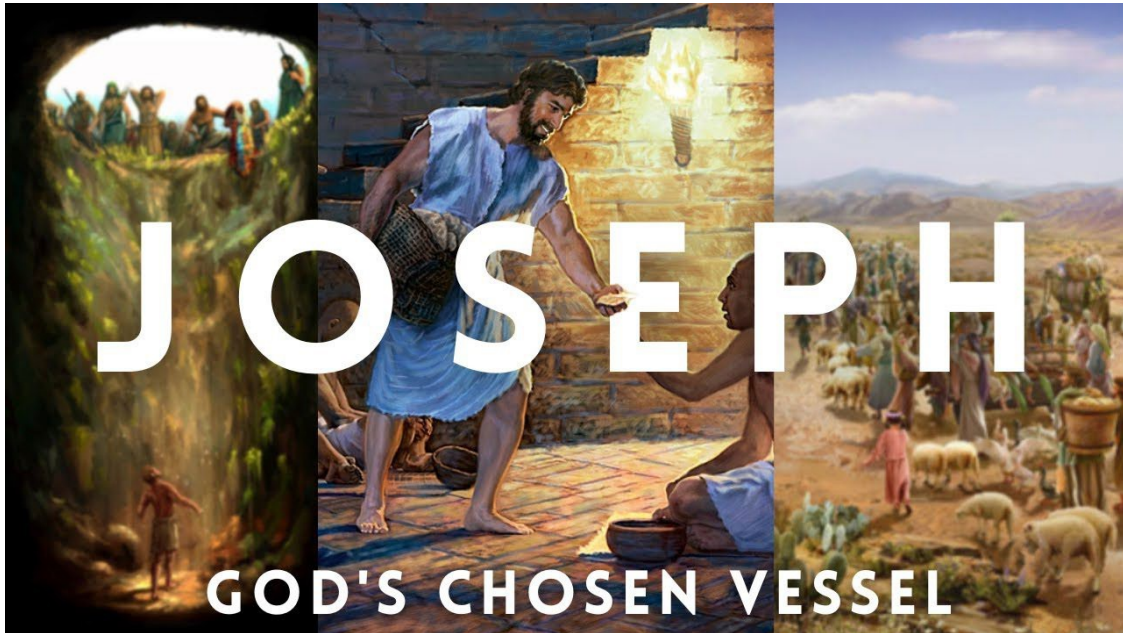
Week 4

Joseph

By: Cheryl Sondergeld

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so that
you may live...”
Isaiah 55:3a*

Week 4: Joseph



Memory Verse (repeat aloud together)

Isaiah 55:3 a: *Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.*

Opening Prayer

God of all our days, we give you thanks for your goodness and mercy. Grant us peace when we are anxious and uncertain about our future. Help us to remember that you are in control when we don't understand. Grant us patience, endurance and focus to listen for your direction. Thank you for your loving presence along our journey. Amen.

Icebreaker

Reflect on your week. In what ways did you incline your ears to hear. Who did you listen to and how? Did you tune anyone or anything out to hear God better? Share with the group as you are able.

Scripture Passage

Summary of Genesis 37-50

The story of Joseph is about Jacob's favorite son, the one he gave a colorful cloak to, who is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Joseph winds up in Egypt and became a valuable servant to Potiphar, one of the Pharaoh's officials. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and he was falsely accused and imprisoned. While in prison, Joseph correctly interpreted other prisoners' dreams and was later summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dream. He was then made governor of Egypt. With this knowledge, Joseph rationed Egypt's produce to prepare for the impending famine and saved many lives in the land. Joseph's family eventually goes to Egypt to escape famine, where they encounter Joseph, who has mercy on them.

Reflection

Our daughter recently treated me to a night out in Cleveland. We went to see the "Gold Over America Tour", which featured athletes from our 2024 USA Gymnastics Team including Simone Biles. A subtle but clear theme about mental health and the power of discerning what voices to listen to was an awesome message for the aspiring young gymnasts and all in the audience. Simone and her teammates have overcome much adversity. It wasn't an easy journey. Through self-care, hard work, dedication, commitment and focus, beautiful things have emerged. Can you relate to this challenge? In your own grand novel of life, through all its twists and turns and highs and lows, who are you listening to? Who is the author of your story? I invite you to consider Joseph and his story. Love, lust, deception, attempted murder, lies, false accusations, false imprisonment...and those are just the highlights of the adversity Joseph faced. Yet, through it all, the abandonment, imprisonment and despair, Joseph listened to God. He had faith and trust that God was with him through it all, even when he could not understand why things were happening. This story is packed full of so many examples of listening it is difficult to narrow them down! Let's dig into some of them together.

Discussion Questions

Joseph listened to God: (Genesis 37: 6-8)

6 He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. 7 There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So, they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

Joseph's story begins with a dream that puts him on his life's path.

Have you ever felt a specific calling or that God has gifted you in ways that have led you to pursue a certain goal or direction for your life?

How have you handled resistance from others when listening to God and following what God has called you to do?

Joseph listened to himself: (Genesis 39:9 &19-20)

9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"...19 When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. 20 And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison.

Even though Joseph was favored by Potiphar, and did not give into the temptation offered by Potiphar's wife, he was still falsely accused and thrown into prison. Joseph knew right from wrong. He listened to his heart, knowing what he had been taught and chose to do what was right.

Can you think of an example of someone choosing integrity over sin?

Joseph listened to community: (Genesis 40:8)

8 They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me."

Whew! Temptation is here again! Can you imagine, after all Joseph's family and community had put him through, the temptation he must have had to ignore their request for help? Whoa, Joe! Only the power of the Holy Spirit can give you that kind of restraint! Yet Joseph interprets their dreams while giving the glory to God.

Can you think of an example of a selfless community servant? How can you serve your community using your faith through listening?

Joseph listened to others: (Genesis 41:39-40)

39 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you."

After many years in captivity, serving as a slave and in prison, Joseph's purpose was revealed. During this time, he listened to others and with the power of the Holy Spirit, interpreted their dreams, which earned him Pharaoh's favor.

Share a time in your life or a Biblical example when God revealed a plan or purpose after listening to others.

Closing Prayer

God of all my days, show me how to be a faithful listener like Joseph. I ask for peace in letting go of the burdens I can and strength to work through what I cannot, knowing you are with me through it all. Amen.

Go and Do

Spend some time listening.

Listen to God: Spend some time reading scripture and in prayer, talking and listening to God about what is weighing you down, holding you back. Write these things down. Pray over them.

Listen to yourself: Review your list. What excites you? What frustrates you? Cross off what you feel you can let go of and are at peace with.

Listen to others: Is there anything still on your list? Share these things with trusted family, friends, etc. Listen and consider their thoughts.

Listen to your community: How are the things you are wrestling with tied to your community? Are there things you can do to be helpful?

Pray over it. Listen. Ask God for the strength to surrender what you can and faithfully, wait on the Lord to show you how to move on the rest.

Resources

Book: Joseph: A Man of Integrity and Forgiveness, Charles R. Swindoll

Podcast: Joseph The Suffering Servant
https://bibleproject.com/podcast/joseph-suffering-servant/?utm_source=web_social_share&medium=shared_podcast

Video: The Story of Joseph <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/torah-genesis-2/>

Music: God Of All My Days Casting Crowns <https://youtu.be/ZYkZE8AogDE>

Movie: Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat
<https://youtu.be/k5VbFJsQrmo>

Week 5

Ruth

By: Cassie Mugler

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so that
you may live...”
Isaiah 55:3a*

Week 5: Ruth

Memory Verse (repeat aloud together)

Isaiah 55:3 *“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live...”*

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come before You with open hearts and minds, seeking Your presence in this time of gathering. Help us to quiet our thoughts and distractions so we may truly listen—to You, to ourselves, to one another, and to the needs of our community. Lord, grant us the humility to hear Your voice guiding us through Scripture and our discussions. Teach us to recognize the whispers of Your wisdom and the gentle nudges of Your Spirit. May we cultivate a spirit of empathy and understanding as we listen to each other, valuing the experiences and insights shared in this space. May our hearts be receptive, and our conversations fruitful, as we learn to listen like You do. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Icebreaker

Reflect on your week. In what ways did you incorporate listening practices into your life? Was there anything you struggled with that you handed over to God? Share with the group as you are able.

Scripture Passages: Ruth 1:1, Ruth 1:3-5, Ruth 1: 16-18

¹ “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons...³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.”

16 “But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!’

18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.”

Reflection

Imagine this, you’re living in a time of famine. Your father-in-law dies. Your brother-in-law dies. Your husband dies. You travel with your mother-in-law to unknown land, where you become the foreigner. Imagine the grief that would accompany these major life changes. Imagine the strength it would take to pull yourself up and move forward to learn a new life. Imagine the tremendous trust in God it would take to reconcile the feelings of these changes. This is the simple story of Ruth.

After reading the story of Ruth, I am amazed by her ability to surrender to God’s plan. Ruth was widowed and given permission to return to her family where she would fall back into the familiar patterns of being a Moabite woman. Instead, she chose to stick with Naomi, her mother-in-law, and travel to a land where she knew no one and was considered a foreigner. She didn’t know the rhythms of life in Bethlehem. She had no clue what was in store for her. What an incredible example of listening to God and to self. Ruth listened to her gut. Her faith allowed her to listen to God and trust that He would provide for her. When she arrived in Bethlehem, Ruth quickly analyzed the community and its rhythms. She was able to identify a field to work in to provide for her and Naomi. Ruth was aware of her strengths and used them to empower her actions. This is a story of not only listening to God and self, but to others and the community. Ruth continuously listens to Naomi. Naomi is her elder, her only family member, and she holds knowledge of Bethlehem and its culture. Naomi encouraged Ruth to be bold and brave; to go into the community and find a way to provide for them. She encouraged Ruth to initiate a relationship with Boaz, who would later become Ruth’s husband. Ruth listened over and over again. In the end, she was rewarded with a new life and a child.

The story of Ruth makes me think of many people who are navigating challenges in their lives with humility and who are being forced to stop and listen. It is Julie, who has recently divorced and is learning a new rhythm to life raising three sons. It is Paul, who is wrongfully imprisoned and learning new skills while he waits and discerns God's plan. It is Paul's mom, who works tirelessly writing letters and advocating for her son to be released; a life she never imagined. It is Cora and John, who are new parents learning to navigate life with a new baby with little sleep. It is Greg and Holly, navigating a new life as empty nesters. It is Emily, who is learning life with a new ostomy to treat Crohn's disease. It is Rachel, taking on extra hours at work to be able to provide for her family, when it feels like there is no end in sight. It is Dari and her family learning a new culture and creating a home in the United States after leaving their homeland. Much like Ruth, these people all are experiencing a tremendous amount of grief (anything they wish were better, different, or more). The common theme among Ruth and my friends, is they are all surrendering to God's plan for them. They are letting go, trusting the process, finding strength in grief, and in all of it being made new. Much like Ruth, my friends are listening to God, listening to self and trusting their gut, listening to others as they discover new routines in their daily lives, much of what feels foreign. And many of them are leaning on the community for guidance, assistance, and acceptance.

If you have time, I invite you to read the book of Ruth, it is a story of God's provision, loyalty, kindness, redemption, and how God can work through ordinary lives to fulfill His purposes.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you discern God's voice in your life? Are you really listening?
2. How can self-awareness lead to better listening and decision making? Reflect on your strengths and name them.
3. What practices can help us be better supporters of others?
4. In what ways can we become more attuned to the needs of our community? Like Ruth, in what ways can we become willing to engage with the community and its customs?

Closing Prayer

Gracious Father,

Thank You for the time we've spent together reflecting on the beautiful story of Ruth. We are grateful for the lessons of loyalty, love, and listening that her journey teaches us. As we leave this space, may we carry these lessons in our hearts and apply them in our lives.

Lord, we now turn to You with our prayers and petitions. We invite everyone to share their requests, whether for themselves, their loved ones, or our community.

(Pause for individuals to share their prayer petitions, either aloud or silently)

Lord, Hear Our Prayer.

As we go forth, fill us with Your peace and strength, and guide us to be instruments of Your love in our community.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Go and Do

- Start by reading Ruth 1-4 again, focusing on how Ruth listened to God, herself, others, and her community.
- Write a brief reflection on what you believe are key characteristics of Ruth's listening. Consider how these traits can apply to your own life.

Week 6

Boy Jesus

By: Bishop Daniel Beaudoin

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so that
you may live...”
Isaiah 55:3a*

Week 6: The Boy Jesus in the Temple

Memory Verse (please recite aloud)

Isaiah 55:3a *"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."*

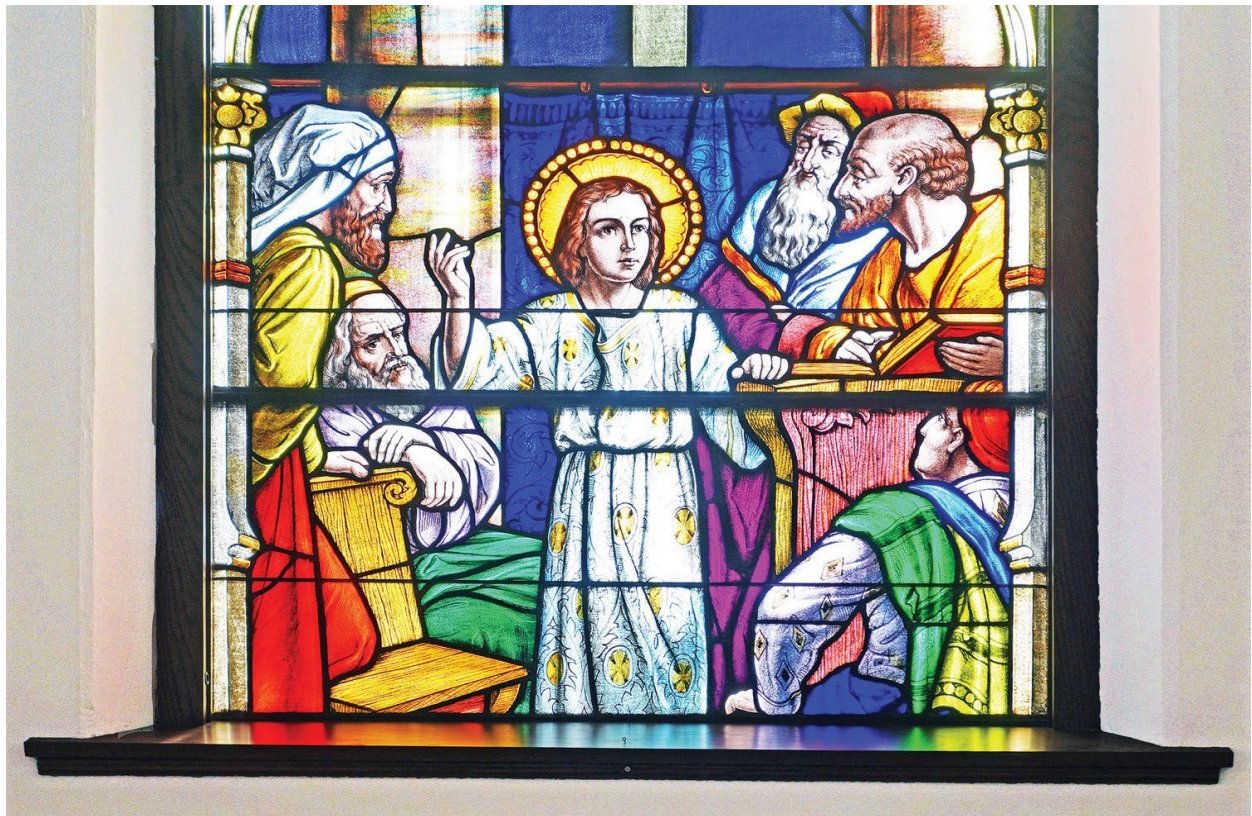
A Prayer for Deep Listening (please pray aloud)

God of all silence. God of all sound, help me to listen.

Help me to listen deeply to the stirrings of my soul.

Guide me to hear your soft voice drawing me deeper into you.

Lead me this day to hear you anew. Amen



(Stained Glass at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in St. Thomas. Missouri)

Opening Activity

Take a moment to reflect on your week. Last week we talked and learned about Ruth. Take a few minutes to share the lists you created on what you believe are key characteristics of Ruth's listening. Share how these traits can apply to your own life.

Scripture Passage: Luke 2:41-51 (please read aloud)

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' ⁴⁹ He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Reflection

I have been blessed in my life with many great teachers. Sunday School teachers introduced me to God's great love through God's powerful stories in Scripture. My 3rd grade teacher, Miss Klee, encouraged us to write down a list of all the books we read that year, and rate them on a scale of one to five. I still keep that annual discipline. Mr. Molnar taught Auto Shop at Avondale High School. He would never tell us how to make a repair but encouraged us to work on solving problems. "*Put your heads together and figure it out*", he would say. History professor, Paul Moreau, encouraged me to improve my research and writing. And while I struggled at the time with his red marks and comments, I have learned to be grateful for the intentional investment he made in me. Seminary Bible professor, Mark Alan Powell, helped to bring the New Testament alive and opened my heart and soul to the intricacy and beauty of God's Word. The call to teach is a noble vocation that makes a real difference in the lives of young people.

In Mark 10:17-22, a rich man with many possessions approaches Jesus and addresses him as, "Good Teacher". In the New Testament, Jesus is well known for his powerful teaching, including the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40). In Luke 2:41-51, we have the unique opportunity of seeing 12-year-old Jesus as both teacher and learner. While in the Temple among the teachers, Jesus listens. Jesus asks questions. And

Jesus provides answers. Think of how delightful that exchange with the religious leaders must have been. I would have loved to have been there.

St. Luke is the only Gospel writer to include the story of the "Boy Jesus in the Temple." We read in 2:41 that Jesus and his family regularly participated in the annual festival of Passover. Luke also points out that Jesus is 12 years old. Think back to when you were 12 years old. What words would you use to describe yourself? According to ancient Jewish culture, 12-year-old Jesus is still a boy. He will become an adult and take his place in the religious community when he is 13 years old. The fact that Jesus is still a boy heightens the story, especially when this 12-year-old boy is holding his own among the most distinguished religious teachers of the day.

But that comes later. In the meantime, Mary and Joseph are in a panic because Jesus is lost. At the end of Passover, Jesus' family begins the journey home. The reader learns that Jesus remains in Jerusalem, unbeknownst to his parents (2:43). Mary and Joseph assume that Jesus is with the group of travelers. The Greek word for a "group of travelers" is *συνοδία* (*synodia*), from where we get the word "synod". They don't realize that Jesus is gone until they've traveled a full day's journey to Nazareth. If you have ever misplaced a child, then you know the feeling. Mary and Joseph return to Jerusalem and after three days they find Jesus in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to the teachers, and questioning the teachers. Jesus also teaching the teachers. And all who hear Jesus, including the teachers, are amazed at his wisdom and understanding. When an astonished Mary lets Jesus know that they have been searching for him with great anxiety, Jesus simply responds, "*I must be in my Father's house*". Even as a boy, Jesus is growing aware of God's purpose for his life.

I love the thought of 12-year-old Jesus learning from the teachers, but also "teaching the teachers". Jesus listens to the distinguished rabbis of the day, and in turn, the distinguished rabbis listen to Jesus. The gift of listening is that it provides an opportunity for us to learn and an opportunity for us to teach. Some of the best teachers are great learners who are also great listeners.

Discussion Questions

1. **Listening to God.** Even as a boy, Jesus prioritized his relationship with God. While Jesus's parents were searching for him, he was in the Temple, listening and learning in the presence of God. How might we prioritize our spiritual growth by taking the time to be in the presence of God in order to listen to God?

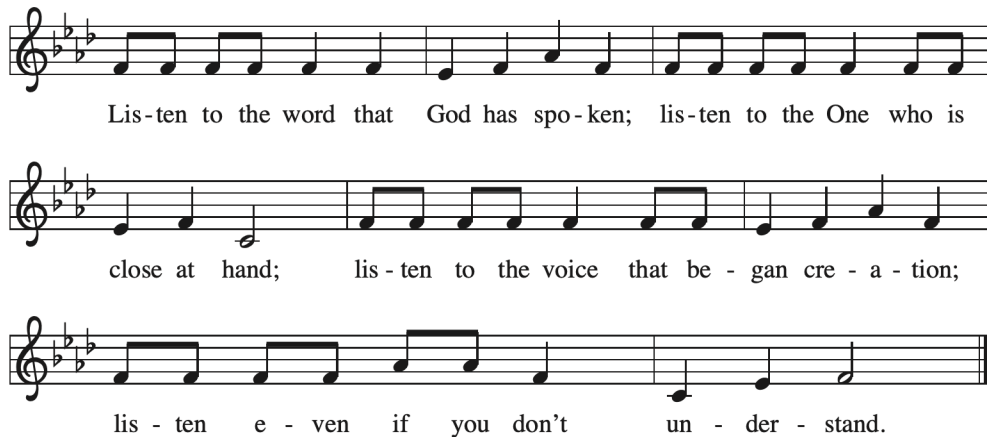
2. **Listening to Others.** Jesus was drawn to the Temple to listen and learn from the religious teachers. These ancient teachers helped Jesus to grow in wisdom and understanding. How might we support others in their journey of faith, especially when they are seeking to understand God’s call on their lives?

3. **Listening to Self.** Jesus tells a concerned Mary, “*I must be in my Father’s house*”. While in the Temple listening and learning, Jesus becomes more aware of his identity and purpose. How might we help people grow in personal confidence and learn the gift of self-reflection?

4. **Listening to the Community.** The teachers and those gathered in the Temple were amazed at Jesus’ understanding and answers. How might you be intentional about listening to someone younger than you? What are you hearing and learning from them?

Closing Hymn: Speak or sing this hymn from *All Creation Sings* #974

Listen to the Word That God Has Spoken



Lis-ten to the word that God has spo-ken; lis-ten to the One who is
 close at hand; lis-ten to the voice that be - gan cre - a - tion;
 lis - ten e - ven if you don't un - der - stand.

Text: Anonymous, Canada
 Music: LISTEN TO THE WORD, Anonymous, Canada; adapt. *Church Hymnary*, 4th Edition, 2005

Go and Do

Teaching is a vocation. Connect with a teacher that you may know. Invite them to join you for coffee (or tea). Ask them to share their journey of becoming a teacher. Ask them to paint a picture of what a typical day of teaching is like. Ask them about the joys and challenges of teaching. Ask them about their hopes and dreams for the future. Listen carefully. At the end of your time together, pay for the coffee (or tea), thank them for the conversation and for their commitment to teaching. Share with your study group a few things you learned from your conversation with a teacher.

Week 7

Paul

By: Chris Fye

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so that
you may live...”
Isaiah 55:3a*

Week 7: Paul

Memory Verse (repeat aloud together)

Isaiah 55:3 a: *“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live...”*

Opening Prayer

God, thank you for loving us as you have made us, weaknesses and all. Thank you for the grace you have freely given us. Help us to remember that your grace is sufficient. Amen.

Icebreaker

Take a moment to reflect on your week. Share with the group the experience of connecting with a teacher. What did you hear? What did you learn? Were you surprised to learn something new?

If you were unable to connect with a teacher, consider the following prompts; Take a moment to recall a favorite teacher. Share that teacher’s name with your study group. What grade were you in? What subject did they teach? What made that teacher such a great teacher? Can you still recall something you learned from that teacher? After everyone has shared, work together to identify 4-5 characteristics of a great teacher.

Scripture Passage: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Summary

In this passage Paul is going through a season of suffering and pain. He asks God three times to alleviate his pain. When Paul is able to listen to God, he realizes that God is telling him that God’s grace is sufficient. By admitting and even boasting of his weaknesses, Paul is then able to turn to Christ for the strength he needs. Paul realized that his season of pain and suffering that he originally thought was a weakness, was instead a gift that made him strong. These seasons of hardship can allow us to strip away the ways we build ourselves up and help us realize we cannot do it all ourselves. It is the grace of Jesus that will carry us through every season of life, including seasons of hardship and suffering.

Reflection

Six years ago I was going through a difficult time and like Paul was experiencing pain that I wanted God to help alleviate. When I read this passage from 2 Corinthians, it resonated with me with how Paul repeatedly appealed to the Lord for the situation to improve and his pain to go away. In my case, I thought I knew what needed to happen to improve the situation, and my prayers were pleading with God for the specific outcome that I wanted. I was so convinced I knew what the solution should be, that my prayers were me telling God what I wanted rather than listening to God. Fortunately, as I reflected on my situation and listened to God, I came to realize that the path God wanted me to be on was different than what I was praying for. Paul said that he appealed to the Lord three times that his situation would be different, and I know that I appealed to the Lord many more times than that. I remembered Jesus' words from Luke 22:42b "*not my will, but yours be done.*" Rather than only praying to God for what I wanted to happen, I also needed to listen to what His will was for me. It was then that I was able to accept and embrace the new path that God had intended for me.

Discussion Questions

Listening to God:

Paul first asked God to remove his pain and suffering, before listening to God who told him that God's grace was sufficient, and that Paul's perceived weakness was actually a strength.

Has there been a time in your life when you have initially thought you wanted something, but after listening to God you realized that God had another path God wanted you to travel?

Listening to ourselves:

Paul wrote about a thorn in his flesh. Many of us have metaphorical thorns in our flesh that cause us pain or are triggers for us. By practicing self-reflection and listening to ourselves, we can become aware of these thorns or triggers so we can monitor our emotions and reactions. We can then respond to situations and other people appropriately, rather than in a reactionary manner because of something that has triggered us.

What have you learned by doing self-reflection and listening to yourself about thorns in your flesh that are triggers for you? How has this helped you be a better version of yourself and to respond more appropriately to situations and other people?

Listening to others and community:

In the example above when I was going through the difficult time and realized that there was a different path God wanted me to be on, one of the things I realized is that God had provided me a support system which I was not fully utilizing. I then met with my pastor, the men's group at my church, and attended support groups. By listening to others who had experienced similar pain to what I was experiencing, I realized I was not alone. I learned from the experiences and wisdom of others which helped me get through that difficult season in my life.

Has there been a time when you initially tried to handle a difficult situation by yourself, before realizing that there was a support system in others and the community which God had provided for you?

Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for being there for us through all the seasons of our life. Help us to listen to you, to ourselves and to others. In your name we pray. Amen

Go and Do

Spend some time listening.

Listen to God: When praying, in addition to communicating to God what your desires are, be sure to ask God for discernment to understand God's will for you.

Listen to yourself: Spend time in self-reflection to understand where in your life are the thorns in your flesh that trigger you. Come up with a plan to recognize these triggers in the moment and have a predetermined better course of action when triggered going forward.

Listen to others and the community: Recognize that God has blessed you with the gift of a support system. If you are experiencing pain or suffering, listen to and learn from the wisdom of others whom God has provided to help you in your time of need. Thank God for this gift!

Resources

[2 Corinthians 12:9 Bible Project Video](#)

Week 8

The Wedding at Cana

By: Calla Gilson

*“Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so that
you may live...”
Isaiah 55:3a*

Week 8: Wedding at Cana

Memory Verse (Read aloud together)

Isaiah 55:3a *“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live...”*

Opening Prayer- Blessing to Open the Ear by Jan Richardson

That as we wake
we will listen.
That as we rise
we will listen.
That before our first words
of the day
we will listen.
That when we meet
we will listen.

That at noontime
we will listen.
That at dusk
we will listen.
That at the gathering
of night
we will listen.
That entering sleep
we will listen still.

—Jan Richardson

Wedding at Cana, 1968 by Sadao Watanabe, Stencil print; ink and color on paper

Icebreaker

Reflect on your week. Share with the group the triggers you identified. How does recognizing our triggers help us to be better listeners? Who is in your support system? How can you take time to listen and learn from them?

Scripture Passage: John 2:1-11 The Wedding at Cana

2 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. 8 He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet." So they took it. 9 When the person in charge tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), that person called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." 11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

Reflection

In the gospel of John, we repeatedly see our God of abundance break into our human experience, putting on flesh to care about the stuff of life, and providing us a glimpse of what this Kingdom of God is all about. Right before this story, John said that his goal is to show us that Jesus is the Word (*logos* in Greek)—not like the words you are reading here, but more like the center of life, the reason for being. Together we are invited to live into each of these stories with our full human-ness, to listen to the words that Jesus speaks, the words spoken to Jesus, and the way that those ordinary things take on an incredible new meaning.

John is super into the five senses, so it's not surprising that despite there being four gospels, this very juicy, wine-soaked story appears only here. This story taps into our humanity and the humanity of Jesus. He's a wedding guest alongside his friends. His mom is bugging him. They're worried about the public humiliation of not-having-enough. What could be more human? Mary has listened long enough to the customs of her community to know what this lack of wine could mean for the family's reputation. But she has also listened to her son and uniquely knows what Jesus is capable of. She's been in conversation with God even longer about a vision of a world-turned-upside-down abundance that will

change everything (See Luke 1:46-55). She has listened and is called to act. So she once again partners with God to give a push.

Jesus has a choice here of whether to listen; to consider and take up the invitation of this moment, or to let it be. It's one of the only times in scripture that Jesus changes his mind, and perhaps it only happens because Mary has now gone beyond him and is speaking to the servants with instructions: listen. "Do whatever he asks of you".

Only the servants in this story know what has really happened; they alone get to be co-creators of this magnificent miracle. They heave heavy stone jars alongside Jesus, their sweat mixing with the water to bringing forth new wine. The bride and groom, the honored guests and family aren't privy to what's happening in the kitchen—the steward himself has no clue. No, it's the least who are invited to work alongside God. Together, they create a generous and over-flowing abundance. The folks in the background, the most mundane of people, turn the most mundane thing into the most extravagant and unexpected blessing.

With his first glass of the new wine, it's the steward's taste buds that incline him to listen. And then incline the community to listen, and then incline us to listen a little more deeply to the meaning here. The story and its significance and the layers of listening expand as the wine does. This is the first of seven signs in John's gospel. Signs are supernatural occurrences that point us to something beyond the actual event. They ask us to listen to what the undeserved abundance of the reign of God is really like. A generosity that starkly contrasts the scarcity with which the story starts.

In our life as humans it's easy to convince ourselves that it's either absolute scarcity or lavish abundance. This wedding that Jesus attended had a context. Life for Jesus and his friends was very much filled with the misery of Roman occupation in first-century Palestine. Scarcity was a familiar companion around tables that often didn't have enough to feed those who gathered around them. These were marginalized people, practicing faithfulness in the midst of oppression. But Jesus didn't meet this moment with sermons on scarcity, with measure of control or even "sunny siding" the situation. Nor did Jesus promise an afterlife of luxury if only we grunt through this one. Rather, when Mary leaned in to hear that familiar voice of scarcity saying that there was not enough, she and the servants and Jesus reminded the guests—and us today—that salvation is playing out right here through the words and deeds of a God in flesh, drinking with his friends from the richest taste of the Kingdom here and now.

Discussion Questions

1. Mary knows Jesus so well. She has listened to him for thirty years, and in her knowing him, she sets in motion a miracle. **Share a story of a time when you have been called on to use your gifts by someone who knew you well. What did that feel like? What was accomplished?**
2. I find it fascinating how John imbues the stories of Jesus with experiences of our five senses. Abundant wine from water at a wedding that is so rich and delicious we can taste it and maybe even feel it fizzy in our heads. Our noses smell the sweet aroma of prayers ascending to God and are also cautioned by Mary the sister of Lazarus that Jesus really shouldn't open her brother's tomb because he already stinks. Thomas is invited to put his fingers in the very human, very not-yet healed wounds in the hands and sides of the newly risen Christ. John calls us into our bodily experience of these stories and asks us to pay attention in new ways. **How would you describe the sensory experience of scarcity? What about the experience of abundance?**
3. This is *a lot* of wine. This is not, like, a few extra bottles found in a cabinet someone had forgotten, or some of that boxed wine someone went to grab from the corner store. We're talking 180-200 gallons of wine! A full bodied, burgundy 4-person hot tub full of wine! Let's imagine together: **What do you think they did with the leftovers?**
4. We get a limited opportunity to listen to voices in this story, as only three people speak. **Whose voices are missing, and what voices do you wish had been included in this story? What does that look like today; who are the people quietly partnering with God to do extraordinary things? What voices don't we hear and how might you seek out opportunities to listen to voices whose stories are untold?**

Closing Prayer

Poured Into Our Hearts by Jan Richardson

Like a cup
like a chalice
like a basin
like a bowl

when the Spirit comes
let it find our heart
like this

shaped like something
that knows how to receive
what is given

that knows how to hold
what comes to fill

that knows how to gather itself
around what arrives as
unbidden
unsought
unmeasured
love.

Go and Do

Oftentimes, the concept of scarcity can creep into our lives through language. Throughout this week, take the opportunity to listen to the language being used in conversations around you. Consider the language being used on the news, with neighbors in the checkout line, in conversation with coworkers, at church, etc.

- Words that indicate scarcity might be preceded by limiting quantifiers like *just, enough, only, or but*. This type of language will usually signal that there is a lack of resources and will speak in terms of restriction and diminishment. Typically, these words indicate that there is not enough.
- Language that reflects abundance is always expansive, implying that there more than enough to share. Words such as *can, create, growth, or plenty* may be found in expansive language.

This week:

1. Notice how others around you are using the language of scarcity or abundance. Is it for a purpose (marketing, etc.)? How does it make you feel? How does it impact the folks around you?
2. Reflect on how you may be using language of abundance and scarcity.
3. In your week of listening, where did you find abundance that you didn't think was there?

Resources

- Check out this awesome *Wine in the Bible* course offered by the *Farminary* at Princeton Theological Seminary!
<https://www.ptsem.edu/academics/departments/farminary/>
- Spend some time in reflection on the painting of the *Wedding at Cana* by Sadao Watanabe above, and then read this Christians for Social Action prayer that was written in reflection on one of Watanabe's many depictions of this sacred scene.
<https://christiansforsocialaction.org/resource/a-prayer-reflecting-on-sadao-watanabes-wedding-at-cana/>
- One of the best books I've ever read about listening is ***Walking to Listen*** by **Andrew Forsthofel**. As a young man, Andrew walked across the United States with the unique goal to listen to folks along his way. Again and again, Andrew was surprised by the generosity, hospitality and sheer abundance extended towards him by strangers. One of my favorite parts of the book is on page 297 when a community throws a spontaneous feast for this weary traveler: *"The tables were the picture of abundance: big pots of mutton stew, Navajo fry bread, blue corn mush wrapped in corn husks, cupcakes, cold iced tea. Arlena and Lily had been cooking since the late morning, and the neighbors had joined them around noon...As I shook hands and learned names, it hit me that these people had spent the whole day preparing for this moment, my arrival. It was the kind of gift that felt too big to receive. It was given unconditionally, which only made me want to give it back more, or give it away elsewhere, just give."* Note: the book contains mature adult themes.