

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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Today we heard two stories — one in a garden and one in a wilderness — and though they seem far apart, they share something deeply human.

In the garden, God spoke trust, saying you are free, you have enough, and you belong here. And then another voice entered asking, “Did God really say...?” It was a whisper — a suggestion that maybe what God has given is not enough. In that, trust bent toward suspicion. Abundance began to feel like scarcity. Relationship gave way to fear. Shame entered. Blame began. Connection fractured.

In the other story and in the wilderness, Jesus first heard at his baptism a voice saying, “You are my beloved.” Later, another voice arrived and said “If you are the Son of God...” Then came the challenge to prove it. To secure himself and to take control. Here, temptation did not sound evil. It sounded practical, reasonable, and protective. Fear began to sound like wisdom. For, distortion does not always begin with lies; it begins when another voice gets in our heads. And we know that experience.

Afterall, some of the loudest voices we hear live inside our own heads, saying: you are not enough, you do not belong, you will fail, and you are unworthy. They sound authoritative, and if we listen long enough, we begin to believe them. Those voices isolate us from ourselves, from one another,

and from God, just like the voice in the garden fractured that first human community.

And, we know this experience beyond ourselves too. We live among confident voices. It's the news headlines that are crafted for outrage, political commentary that reframes reality, and half-truths repeated until they begin to sound whole. You see, distortion rarely shouts. Instead, it persuades. It repeats. It settles into the background until it begins to sound real.

And as I was thinking about how convincing distortion can sound, I was reminded of a recent experience. Last fall, as we prepared for the Construction Kickoff, I was drafting a press release. I uploaded some documents and asked an AI tool to help get me started. It did a good job — it had a clear structure, a strong tone, and was aligned with the campaign. When I reached the place where a few quotes were added, they were beautiful, inspiring, and were attributed to members of the Steering Committee. I thought, wow — those are perfect quotes! But I didn't remember anyone saying those words. So, I scanned the documents I shared and found nothing. So, I asked AI if the quotes were real. It said they were and with such confidence! So, I reread everything again even more closely, but I still could find anything like them. Eventually, I pressed it a bit more and it finally admitted that the quotes were not real. AI had hallucinated giving me what I wanted to hear, but with something that was fake. (Has anyone else had this struggle with AI?)

Now, what scared me most wasn't that they were false. What got me was how quickly I began to doubt myself because the voice sounded so certain. Confidence, it turns out, is not the same as truth. Authority is not the same

as accuracy. And voices that sound convincing are not always the voices we should trust.

And perhaps that's why on the first Sunday of Lent each year we hear Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. For, Lent is a season to listen more carefully and to notice what shapes us, distracts us, and what speaks the most confidently into our lives. This year, we're using a series created by *Sanctified Art* under the theme of "seeking" where we'll engage "honest questions for deeper faith." Together we will sit with questions — questions asked in the dark, on the road, and at the well — questions that invite us to listen more deeply for God's voice. And the first question before us today is: "Who will you listen to?" Will it be the whisper that distorts trust, the voice that demands proof, the chorus of shame that says you are not enough, or the confident voices that sound certain even when they are not true?

In this question, the gospel meets us — not after we have figured things out, not after we get it right, not after we silence every distorted voice. Rather, in the questioning, the confusion, and in the noise. Among the distortion, God speaks belovedness. Amid the fear, Christ speaks peace. Surrounded by shame, the Spirit restores dignity. After all, Jesus did not argue with the tempter by becoming louder; he trusted the voice that had named him beloved. He refused spectacle, domination, and control. He chose trust, he chose truth, and he chose love.

And in Christ we hear again what has always been true: you are beloved. You belong. You are not defined by fear, shame, or the loudest voice around you. God's voice does not accuse; God's voice restores. God's voice does not shrink the circle; God's voice restores it. God's voice leads toward

freedom, not control; toward dignity, not exclusion; toward life, not fear. For, grace is not earned. Love is not rationed. Belonging is not scarce. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This is the voice Jesus trusts in the wilderness. This is the voice that still speaks.

When we begin to listen to God's voice, we begin to see the world differently. We see immigrants not as threats but as neighbors. We see LGBTQIA+ people not as problems but as gifts. We see women as leaders and people living with disabilities as bearers of wisdom. For, God's voice always expands belonging.

And this is why, as a community, we keep learning to listen more deeply. This year, our Third Sunday Teaching Bible Study continues exploring how harmful interpretations have distorted God's voice — and how we can listen again for the God revealed in Jesus. Next Sunday, we listen to God's voice as we welcome Lutheran Social Services of Illinois to lead Justice First Sunday. And, on some Thursdays in Lent we gather for Taize-style midweek worship that opens us up to hearing God's voice.

You see, this Lent, we are invited — not obligated — to listen more deeply, to notice where distortion replaces truth, to return to the voice that calls us beloved, and to ground our lives in God's voice.

So, friends, our Lenten journey begins with listening — not to fearful certainty or to distorted truth, but to the voice of God: a voice of love, a voice of justice, and a voice that sets us free. So, may we hear that voice with clarity. May God's voice of grace echo among us. And may we turn toward that voice again this Lenten season and beyond. Amen.