

⊕ LIVING COMPASS

Living Well Through Lent 2021



*Listening With All Your Heart,
Soul, Strength, and Mind*

A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

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Are there others with whom you might want to share this Lent journey through this devotional booklet? Following are two additional ways you, and others, can deepen your experience of Lent.

Visit us at LivingCompass.org/Lent to learn more or to sign up.



Living Well Through Lent 2021

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Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

Lent Facebook Retreat Group

We would like to invite you to join our Lent Facebook retreat group. If you participate in this private group, you will be enriched by your interactions with hundreds of others who are also reading this devotional.

Daily Devotional Emails

We also are offering an opportunity for you to have the reflections from this devotional emailed to you each day during Lent.

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*By being attentive, by learning to listen (or
recovering the natural capacity to listen which
cannot be learned any more than breathing), we
can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it
cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one
with everything in that hidden ground of Love for
which there can be no explanation.*

—Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*

*The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative was
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While Ab passed away in 2016, their generous support
continues to inspire us and make this resource possible.*



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About the Writers

Martha Johnson Bourlakas is a Mom, educator, author, and business owner. Her first book, a collection of essays, is *Lovefeast: Together at the Table*. Her second book, *Our One Word: Creating Spiritual Joy and Depth*, arose from a curriculum she wrote for women's spirituality groups within the Episcopal Church. Martha leads *Our One Word* workshops and retreats, and owns *Storied Goods*, based in Roanoke, Virginia. Martha and Mark are parents of three daughters, ages 26, 23, and 17.



Robbin Brent is the Director of Publications and Resource Development for Living Compass, founder of Wisdom Way of Knowing, Inc., and the former Director of the Center for Spiritual Resources in North Carolina. Robbin is an experienced leader of spiritual retreats and programs, facilitates gatherings of contemplative leaders around the world, and is a graduate of Shalem's Transforming Community program. She loves spending time with her two sons and grandson, hiking, and early morning coffee and communion with the wildlife that graces her backyard.



Randall Curtis is a father of two wonderful children and is a clergy spouse living in North Little Rock, Arkansas. He has over 22 years' experience in Episcopal youth ministry and currently serves the Episcopal Church in Arkansas as the Evangelist and Ministry Developer. He has served as a youth ministry trainer and served the church at all levels. In his spare time he raises tortoises, sells on ebay and devours science fiction. He is also the holy geek at theholypeek.com.





The Rev. Donald Allston Fishburne, D.Min. is an Episcopal priest and church consultant. He and Sarah are privileged to live, listen, love, and serve on the coasts of South Carolina and Maine. They have enjoyed leading pilgrims to the Holy Land and to other holy places, to walk where Jesus and his followers have walked, to see and to hear in new ways, and to be guided by the Spirit to share the Good News.



Heidi J. Kim serves as the Director of the Melrose Family Center for Servant Leadership at the Breck School in Golden Valley, Minnesota. Her experiences in church-wide ministry and education have focused on stories of survivors and disrupters of oppression and marginalization, as well as the struggles of faithful people to speak across differences while remaining in community. Her passion is working with curious, diligent, and loving people to maintain stronger and more faithful communities. Heidi is married to Dr. Alec Campbell, has two adult daughters, Fiona (23) and Kiera (20), and an 8-year-old rescue Doberman named Taz. Though she lives in Minnesota, she remains an avid Boston Red Sox and Seattle Seahawks fan.



The Rev. Jan Kwiatkowski is an Episcopal priest, licensed marriage and family therapist practicing Telemental Health in Wisconsin, and works part time with the Living Compass team. Jan and Dennis have been married for over 40 years. Between the families of their four adult sons, they are blessed with eight grandchildren who are the absolute joys of their lives. Dancing and performing in parades with the Milwaukee Dancing Grannies, knitting, and sipping almond milk lattes are also a source of life and joy for Jan.





Malcolm McLaurin is a senior seminarian at The University of the South: School of Theology in Sewanee, Tennessee, out of the Diocese of Olympia. Prior to seminary, he spent 20+ years as a lay minister in the Episcopal church in Arkansas, California, and Washington. His background is in children's, youth, and young adult ministry. During his time at Sewanee he has discovered a deep love of the Old Testament and the Hebrew language. Malcolm is the father of two wonderful boys, Eli (13) and Myles (9), and the husband of a patient wife, Hannah. In his free time, he can be found reading, writing poetry, or engaging in his love of photography.



The Rev. Craig A. Phillips, Ph.D. serves as Rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Arlington, Virginia. A former Assistant Professor at Temple University, he now serves as adjunct faculty at Virginia Theological Seminary. He earned his doctorate in Theology and Ethics at Duke University and continues to publish academic articles. He is an avid road cyclist. He and his wife Marguerite have two sons, four grandchildren, and live with Madison, their chocolate Lab.



The Rev. Lisa G. Saunders is associate rector at Christ Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, where she has served for thirty-three years. She is married to Tim, the mother of three adult children, and grandmother of one. She is the author of *Even at the Grave*, a memoir told through the lens of funerals, and *From Stars to Stable*, a Christmas children's book. She enjoys cycling, travel, and pummeling a speedbag.





The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner—founder of the Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative—has served his community for more than 30 years as an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, licensed marriage and family therapist, and author. In addition to his coaching and psychotherapy work, he leads wellness retreats for organizations and leadership teams. Scott has been married to Holly Hughes Stoner for 41 years and together they are the co-creators of *The Teen Compass* and the *Parent Wellness Compass*. In his free time, Scott loves cycling, running, and soccer, and spending time with family, especially with his two grandsons.



The Ven. Dr. Dawna Wall is priest at St. Michael and All Angels' Anglican Church in the Diocese of Islands and Inlets in British Columbia, Canada, and an adjunct professor at Vancouver School of Theology. She loves helping people connect to God, one another, and their gifts in vibrant and diverse ways. Dawna learns, grows, and prays with her husband, Ron, their two daughters, and a playful whippet who keeps them on their toes.



The Living Compass Model for Well-Being: A Brief Overview

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your
soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.*

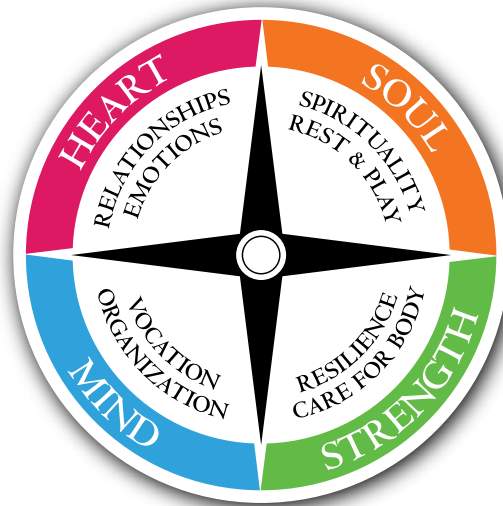
—Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5

Living Compass provides tools and trainings to assist individuals, families, and congregations as they seek to live the life God calls them to in all areas of life—heart, soul, strength, and mind. We use these as our four compass points to help guide and equip us in eight areas of wellness.

Areas of Wellness

Heart

- **Relationships.** The ability to create and maintain healthy, life-giving connections with others.
- **Handling Emotions.** The ability to process, express, and receive emotions in a healthy way.



The Living Compass

Soul

- **Spirituality.** The ability to develop and practice a strong personal value system, and to discover a meaningful purpose in life.
- **Rest and Play.** The ability to balance work and play and to renew oneself.



Strength

- **Resilience.** The ability to deal positively with the adversities of life.
- **Care for the Body.** The ability to build healthy habits and practices regarding our physical well-being, as well as the ability to end unhealthy ones.

Mind

- **Vocation.** The ability to align our life's purpose with the gifts and talents given by God. This includes work, volunteer service, and any educational/enrichment activities.
- **Organization.** The ability to keep track of and make good use of possessions, money, and time.

Creating resources grounded in the integration of faith and wellness is what makes Living Compass different from other wellness programs. Living Compass believes we all have many compasses that compete to guide our lives, often outside of our awareness. When we choose to make faith the compass that guides decisions in all areas of our lives, we are better able to experience wellness and wholeness. It is worth noting that “health,” “healing,” “wholeness,” and “holy” all come from the same root word “hal” or “haelen.”

Introduction

Lent is a time for introspection and self-reflection, a time to reflect on the core of what it means to live a Christian life in the midst of great change and uncertainty. When facing change and uncertainty, few practices are more central to that life than listening—listening to ourselves, listening to others, and listening to God.

We are delighted that you have chosen to use our 2021 Lenten devotional to assist you on your own journey. And we are honored to have ten guest writers to help us reflect on this year's theme of *Listening With All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*. Their diverse and rich voices encourage us to understand that in order to prepare for the new life of Easter, we need to be intentional about discerning what it truly means to listen with our whole being.

As important as are the daily readings in this devotional, even more significant will be the reflections and insights that emerge in response to the readings. We encourage you to record them, either in the spaces provided, or in a separate journal. When possible, join or start a group (online if necessary) where you can discuss your thoughts with others. Our Facilitator Guide provides guidance on how to use this devotional when hosting small-group reflection and conversation.

I would also like to invite you to join our Lenten Facebook retreat group. If you participate in this private online group, you will be enriched by your interactions with hundreds of others who are also reading this devotional. We also are offering an opportunity to have the reflections from this devotional emailed to you each day during Lent. See the inside front cover for more information.

It is an honor to walk with you on the journey through Lent toward Easter.



The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner

Director, Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness
Ministry Initiative

The Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Lent 2021

Lent Year B	First reading	Psalms	Second reading	Gospel
Ash Wednesday February 17, 2021	Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 OR Isaiah 58:1-12	Psalms 51:1-17	2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10	Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
First Sunday in Lent February 21, 2021	Genesis 9:8-17	Psalms 25:1-10	1 Peter 3:18-22	Mark 1:9-15
Second Sunday in Lent February 28, 2021	Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16	Psalms 22:23-31	Romans 4:13-25	Mark 8:31-38 OR Mark 9:2-9
Third Sunday in Lent March 7, 2021	Exodus 20:1-17	Psalms 19	1 Corinthians 1:18-25	John 2:13-22
Fourth Sunday in Lent March 14, 2021	Numbers 21:4-9	Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22	Ephesians 2:1-10	John 3:14-21
Fifth Sunday in Lent March 21, 2021	Jeremiah 31:31-34	Psalms 51:1-12 OR Psalm 119:9-16	Hebrews 5:5-10	John 12:20-33
Liturgy of the Palms March 28, 2021 Sixth Sunday in Lent		Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29		Mark 11:1-11 OR John 12:12-16

Holy Week Year B	First reading	Psalms	Second reading	Gospel
Monday of Holy Week March 29, 2021	Isaiah 42:1-9	Psalms 36:5-11	Hebrews 9:11-15	John 12:1-11
Tuesday of Holy Week March 30, 2021	Isaiah 49:1-7	Psalms 71:1-14	1 Corinthians 1:18-31	John 12:20-36
Wednesday of Holy Week March 31, 2021	Isaiah 50:4-9a	Psalms 70	Hebrews 12:1-3	John 13:21-32
Maundy Thursday April 1, 2021 Holy Thursday	Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14	Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19	1 Corinthians 11:23-26	John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Good Friday April 2, 2021	Isaiah 52:13-53:12	Psalms 22	Hebrews 10:16-25 OR Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9	John 18:1-19:42
Holy Saturday April 3, 2021	Job 14:1-14 OR Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24	Psalms 31:1-4, 15-16	1 Peter 4:1-8	Matthew 27:57-66 OR John 19:38-42
Resurrection of the Lord April 4, 2021 Easter Day	*Acts 10:34-43 OR Isaiah 25:6-9	Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24	1 Corinthians 15:1-11 OR Acts 10:34-43	John 20:1-18 OR Mark 16:1-8

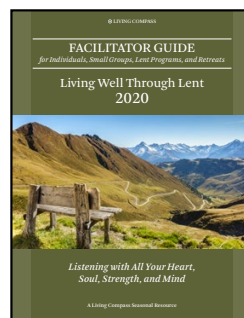
Living Compass has also published, *Vivir una buena Cuaresma en el 2021: Escuchando con todo el corazón, alma, fuerzas y mente*—a Spanish Lenten devotional with completely original content. To learn more or to order, visit livingcompass.org/lent. Questions? Contact us: info@livingcompass.org.



Ways to Use Living Well Through Lent 2021 A Personal Devotional and a Lenten Program

This devotional is intended to be used for daily personal reflection as we journey through Lent. We begin each Sunday with a reflection written by one of our guest writers. Every other day of the week begins with Scripture or a quote, followed by a reflection, and then “Making it Personal” questions, which offer an opportunity for you to reflect on the readings as they relate to your own life and spiritual journey. You might want to write down important thoughts, feelings, or insights. If you are reading this on an eReader, we encourage you to purchase a journal to use as a companion to this devotional.

This devotional can also be used as the basis for a church Lenten program, and we have created a free downloadable Facilitator Guide for group use, available on our website: LivingCompass.org/Lent.



The devotional is also perfect as a resource for a half- or full-day Lenten retreat (more on this in the Lent Facilitator Guide). Giving each person a copy of this devotional (either printed or as a PDF, available for free on our website) would ensure that the experience of the retreat would stay with them throughout the remainder of Lent.

We are excited to offer two additional options for engaging this devotional. The reflections will be available as a daily email that you can subscribe to, and we will be hosting a private online Lenten retreat group based on this resource during Lent on Facebook. You can learn more about both of these resource offerings on our website: LivingCompass.org/Lent.

This Lenten season, however you use this devotional, our hope and prayer is that you feel supported in your desire to more fully practice your faith in a way that is deeply renewing.

Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2021

Listening With All Our Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

by Lisa Saunders

The word “listen” contains the same letters as the word “silent.”

—Alfred Brendel

One year for Lent I gave up yelling at my children.

They were ten, eight, and four. My volume control was no longer under control. I raised my voice far too often, making none of us happy. I told our children the plan. They were thrilled and took great pleasure in holding me accountable.

Of all the Lenten disciplines I have taken on through the years, this one stuck. I broke a bad habit. I had been yelling because no one appeared to be listening to me. As it turned out, the less I yelled, the more they heard me. And I found I was better at listening to them.

It surprised me to realize that being good at listening is not just about hearing what someone says. It is also about how my listening makes someone else *feel*.

Ash Wednesday is the start to a season inviting us to set aside or stop whatever gets in the way of our listening well. The letters in the word “listen” can be rearranged to spell “silent.” I am not any good at silence. But I don’t think God yells, so if I want to hear God, I must get quiet. It is lovely to imagine that I might delight God by the way I listen.

Listening is essential for the development of intimacy, trust, healing, and wisdom. Listening to our loved ones (heart), to our longings (soul), to our body (strength), and to our insight (mind) are all forms of prayer and listening to God. I find that God speaks to me most often through other people, but I also hear God’s voice in my gut, in my bliss, and in my ounce of common sense.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Listening with our heart, soul, strength, and mind has restorative powers. Some pain cannot be taken away, but hurt that is heard can be eased. When we listen with a desire to understand and appreciate, we unfurl and expand. The woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment was healed of her disease. She also got to tell Jesus "the whole truth." That he listened to her story likely healed her soul, as well.

My two favorite Lents were those that I was on maternity leave. I didn't take on any special Lenten practice, although I sacrificed sleep and sanity all forty days. I spent those Lents falling in love, nestling a grapefruit-sized head against my heart. I am spending this Lent nuzzling the head of my infant grandson. I am listening for his fretful cries, contented coos, and still, small voice. If I am quiet enough, I will hear the love between us flowing like a rushing river.



Thursday, February 18, 2021

Barriers to Listening

by Scott Stoner

*Listening is essential for the development of
intimacy, trust, healing, and wisdom.*

—Lisa Saunders

When you ask a young child to do something they don't much feel like doing, such as picking up their toys or getting ready for bed, there is a reaction they commonly have that is simultaneously amusing and a bit off-putting. They cover their ears to keep from listening to what is being said to them. The logic is if they can't hear, they won't have to do what is being asked of them.

While I don't do anything quite so obvious as putting my hands over my ears when someone is talking to me, I certainly can do other things that interfere with my being a good listener. I can, for example, interrupt a person speaking to me. I can pretend to be listening when, in fact, my mind is somewhere else. I can also multitask when someone is talking to me, which clearly says I am not giving them my full attention.

Our focus for this Lent daily devotional is listening. As we begin this journey, I invite each of us to become aware of things we do, intentionally or not, that limit our ability to listen well. As Lisa Saunders wrote yesterday, "Ash Wednesday is the start to a season inviting us to set aside or stop whatever gets in the way of our listening well."

Making It Personal: What gets in the way of your ability to listen well to others? Can you think of a time recently when you did not give your full attention to someone? If so, what can you learn from that experience?

THE THIRD DAY IN LENT

Friday, February 19, 2021

Practicing Listening

by Scott Stoner

Practice makes progress, not perfection.

—Unknown

I have been taking private Spanish lessons for the last two years. My teacher lives in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and we talk via Skype for one hour every week. There are two things that I have discovered from my experience of learning to speak Spanish that I would like to apply to our focus this Lent on listening.

First, I find that I am much better at speaking Spanish than listening to someone else speak it. Speaking is easier for me because I know what it is I am trying to say. Listening is more difficult because I have to intentionally focus all my attention on understanding what my teacher is saying to me. I find that my mind wanders more easily when I am listening to something I don't fully understand than when I am formulating my own sentences, and so I must discipline myself to focus.

Second, my teacher always reminds me that if I genuinely want to improve both my speaking and listening, I have to practice, practice, and practice. We only become more proficient at something by practicing it, not by merely wishing to be more proficient.

The parallels here to our focus this Lent are clear. For many people, speaking seems to come more naturally than listening. Listening usually requires more intentional commitment and effort. If we want to enhance our ability to listen, we will need to practice, practice, and practice.

Making It Personal: Do you find that, in general, listening is more difficult than speaking for you? What helps you to focus as you listen to someone else? Are you ready to make a commitment this Lent to practice listening?



Saturday, February 20, 2021

Talk Less, Listen More

by Scott Stoner

One who spares words is knowledgeable.

—Proverbs 17:27

I regularly listen to the soundtrack from *Hamilton: An American Musical*. There is a line in the second song on the album, “Aaron Burr, sir,” that relates to our focus on listening.

In this song, we hear an anxious Alexander Hamilton meeting Aaron Burr for the first time. He is talking incessantly as he tries to get Burr’s attention. At one point in the song, after Burr has heard more than enough, he turns to Hamilton and says, “Let me offer you some free advice. Talk less, smile more.”

For our purposes, I would like to rephrase it slightly. “Let me offer you some free advice. Talk less, listen more.” Like Hamilton, I know I am especially vulnerable to talking too much when I feel anxious or insecure. As I have grown older, I have learned to become more comfortable with making room for silence in interactions with others, and not anxiously filling natural lulls in the conversation.

In her Ash Wednesday reflection, Lisa Saunders candidly shared how one year she gave up yelling at her children for Lent. Sometimes learning to talk less is not just about the number of words we speak, but also about the choice and tone of the words we use. Lisa expressed this when she wrote that she realized how the way she spoke impacted the way others felt. My prayer is that paying close attention to how we speak and how we listen will be an enriching Lenten discipline for us all.

Making It Personal: Do you tend to talk at times more than you listen? What are you aware of at this point that can help you to “talk less, listen more”? In your prayer life, do you tend to spend more time talking than listening?

The First Sunday in Lent

February 21, 2021

Soul Wrestling

by Dawna Wall

*The Wilderness holds answers to more questions
than we have yet learned to ask.*

—Nancy Wynne Newhall

It is often unsettling to realize anew that the distance from joy to despair is so short and also so long. Jesus, in offering himself for the cleansing ritual of baptism, has listened for and heard deep inside his soul that he is beloved and this knowledge spurs him toward the soul wrestling that devastates and renews. Soul wrestling is a familiar story in Scripture—we think of Jacob and the angel, of Hagar in the wilderness, of the many unnamed women and men who cry out, reach toward the healing love of God and limp forward, changed and blessed.

In our wrestling places we might ask for a sign, a promise, some hint that the anguish of this present moment is not all there is. Mark's Gospel shrinks the story of Jesus' wilderness time to a few sentences, but between the lines there is a world of experience. As there is with ours too. "It's a long story," we might say, without telling it. That's where Jesus is—coming to terms with the hunger of body, mind, and spirit and, as he wrestles, reciting to himself the promises of Scripture that he knows by heart. All while listening deeply to what God is revealing to him in the wilderness.

As we seek to live well through Lent, we too will need to confront our wilderness places—wrestling again and again with the insecurities, the frustrations, the hungers that leave us feeling less than and not enough. Like Jesus we listen and watch for signs, in glimpses of rainbows, in refrains of Psalms—words and images to help us remember the way from despair to hope.

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Poet and theologian, Pádraig Ó Tuama writes, “To engage with the text this way requires careful and heartfelt reading, noticing the nooks and crannies where the imagination can lodge, paying attention to the curiosities that emerge and creating a stopping-point there” (*Daily Prayer with the Corrymeala Community*, p. 61).

Honoring the stopping points, the rest areas, and the lookouts are all opportunities to assess where we are on our faith journeys. How we live well in the midst of deep sorrow and unexpected joy. Making space where our “imagination can lodge” and engaging in curiosity as we look around and listen for where we have been, where we are now, and where we are going, are all ways that we honor those angular parts of our stories, the wrestling and the resolution.



Monday, February 22, 2021

Listening to Ourselves

by Scott Stoner

*Your inner voice is the voice of divinity. To hear it, we
need to be in solitude, even in crowded places.*

—A. R. Rahman

Each Monday we will introduce a theme for the week related to our overall theme of listening. This week our theme is “listening to ourselves.”

We start with the focus of listening to ourselves because we believe that how we listen to ourselves sets the pattern for how we listen in all other areas of our lives, including how we listen to others, and how we listen to God. If we are curious and open in listening to ourselves, we will be curious and open in listening to others. If we have a pattern of not listening well to ourselves, we will likely repeat that pattern in other areas of our lives, as well.

As the quote from A. R. Rahman states, when we listen to our inner voice, we are listening for how God is always whispering to us. When attended to, that inner, divine voice can serve as a compass to guide our lives. It can also serve as a guide for how to listen to others. Rahman also reminds us that creating time for solitude and quiet within ourselves is essential for being able to hear the divine inner voice.

In yesterday’s reflection, Dawna Wall wrote about soul wrestling. She described well the biblical stories of people wrestling with their inner selves and with God as they seek healing, guidance, and wholeness. Sometimes soul wrestling is necessary to help us remove barriers that impede our ability to listen more fully to ourselves.

Making It Personal: How might you create some regular time of solitude to listen to the inner divine voice this Lent? Are you aware of any barriers within yourself that impede your ability to listen well?

Tuesday, February 23, 2021

Listening With All Our Heart

by Scott Stoner

When you encounter difficulties and contradictions, do not try to break them, but bend them with gentleness and time.

—Saint Francis de Sales

Beginning today, and continuing through Friday, I will use the Living Compass Model for Well-Being and its four quadrants of heart, soul, strength, and mind to structure my reflections about listening to ourselves. Today we will focus on the *Heart* quadrant, which includes our *Emotions* and *Relationships*.

As a psychotherapist, I commonly meet with people who initially want help in getting rid of uncomfortable emotions, such as fear, sadness, anger, or anxiety. I typically respond that the most important first step is to begin by listening to what those troubling emotions are trying to say. Our emotions function like the warning lights on a car dashboard, letting us know that there is an underlying issue that may need to be explored and addressed.

Just as it is wise to learn to listen to uncomfortable emotions within ourselves, it is also wise to learn to honor and listen to discomfort if or when it arises in an important relationship in our lives. Ignoring uncomfortable feelings rarely helps them to go away. Instead, gently facing discomfort in a relationship, and risking what initially may be an awkward conversation, can be crucial in deepening and improving the relationship.

Because uncomfortable emotions, either within ourselves or in our relationships, are well, uncomfortable, it is understandable that we might want to avoid them. If we do that, though, often we will find that what we resist, persists, and that what we face, with time and care, can be resolved.

Making It Personal: As you listen to what's happening right now with your emotions and/or your relationships, what do you hear? If you are experiencing any discomfort, can you sit with it to see what it has to teach you? What do you think of the idea that "what we resist, persists"?



Wednesday, February 24, 2021

Listening With All Our Soul

by Scott Stoner

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

—Matthew 11:28-29

The *Soul* quadrant of the Living Compass focuses on *Spirituality* and *Rest & Play*. One way in which these two areas intersect is with the spiritual practice of sabbath time.

The practice of taking time for sabbath is so crucial that it is one of the Ten Commandments. Whether we choose to observe one full day a week as a sabbath, or shorter periods of sabbath time throughout the week, any choice to be still and rest is genuinely a counter-cultural choice in our “busy-is-better” world.

Jesus talks about finding “rest for our souls,” which raises the question of what signs we might need to watch out for that are letting us know when our souls are tired and in need of rest. Here are a few signs that I have noticed in myself and others. See if any of these match your experience.

- Feeling chronically tired even when getting enough sleep.
- Compassion fatigue from giving so much of ourselves to others.
- Holding on to worries instead of releasing them into God’s care.
- Overworking and over-functioning to the point of exhaustion.
- Not being able to let go of mistakes you or others have made.

Listening to the signs of soul fatigue is the first step in addressing the problem. Next, we need to follow the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:29 and be “gentle and humble in heart” with ourselves and with others, as we turn to God for rest and renewal.

Making It Personal: As you pause and listen to your soul, do you hear any signs of soul fatigue? If so, gently and humbly name what you are experiencing. What is one specific thing you could do to create more sabbath time in your day or week, more time to turn to God for rest and renewal?

THE FIRST WEEK IN LENT

Thursday, February 25, 2021

Listening With All Our Strength

by Scott Stoner

*Once you start approaching your body with curiosity
rather than with fear, everything shifts.*

—Bessel van der Kolk

Continuing our week's focus on listening to ourselves, we now turn to the *Strength* section of the Living Compass, focusing on *Care for the Body and Stress Resilience*.

Most of us are familiar with the idea of body language. For example, if someone folds their arms and moves back, it could mean they are not open to hearing what we are saying. Whereas, on the other hand, if they lean and seem interested, it often means they want to listen. In this reflection, we will focus on our own bodies and how to be open to hearing what they might be saying to us.

Our bodies always tell the truth. If we get sick repeatedly, for instance, our bodies may be trying to warn us about the amount of stress in our lives, the current choices we are making around diet, sleep, and exercise.

If we don't regularly listen to our bodies when they are quietly whispering to us, we may eventually find them impossible to ignore when they "shout" at us to get our attention. Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., author of the best-selling book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, reminds us that our bodies internalize and hold on to stress and unresolved hurt. If ignored, our stresses and hurts will gradually build up until they demand to be heard.

Learning to listen to what our bodies are telling us with curiosity, instead of fear or judgment, is the first step in healing and resolving any stress or hurt we may be experiencing.

Making It Personal: What do you think of the idea that our bodies always tell the truth? Are you aware of a time when you resisted a message your body was trying to give to you? Take a few moments right now and listen compassionately to your body, being curious about what it might be quietly, or not so quietly, telling you.



Friday, February 26, 2021

Listening With All Our Mind

by Scott Stoner

*You will know your vocation by the joy that it brings
you. You will know. You will know when it is right.*

—Dorothy Day

The *Mind* quadrant of the Living Compass includes *Vocation* and *Organization*. We will focus on vocation in this reflection.

You may associate vocation with people who live a religious life as their chosen profession, such as priests and nuns. In truth, we all have a vocation, a calling in life. God has given each of us a unique set of gifts, as well as a unique role to fill in the world. Each of us is called to use our gifts and fulfill our roles in a way that honors and serves God.

It is also worth noting that our vocation is often separate from our paid work. Our vocation can be expressed in our relationships with friends, family, neighbors, and volunteer or service work that we may do. Our vocation can also shift over our lifetime, as we continue to encounter new opportunities to both clarify and express our gifts.

Frederick Buechner, author and theologian, wrote that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Combining this with the quote above from Dorothy Day, we see that when we are living out our own unique vocation, we feel a deep sense of joy. As 1 Corinthians 12 also reminds us, “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit,” and so, too, there are a variety of ways we can express our vocation throughout our lifetime.

Making It Personal: Today I invite you to listen to your experience of vocation in your life right now. How are you feeling about where your gifts and the needs of the world are intersecting? Are you feeling the joy Buechner describes in this area of your life? If not, is there a shift that perhaps you are being called to make?

THE FIRST WEEK IN LENT

Saturday, February 27, 2021

Listening to Ourselves Takes Courage

by Scott Stoner

*As we seek to live well through Lent, we too will need
to confront our wilderness places—wrestling again and
again with the insecurities, the frustrations, the hungers
that leave us feeling less than and not enough.*

—Dawna Wall

When hiking a trail, it is common to find benches along the way where hikers can stop and take a rest, like the bench we see on the front cover. I invite us to use today as a bench to sit upon and to take a rest, reflecting on the challenging work of listening more fully to ourselves that we have engaged in this week.

Dawna Wall described this challenging work of genuinely listening to ourselves in her reflection last Sunday. She reminded us that listening to ourselves can bring us face to face with our insecurities and frustrations. The temptation is to turn away and not listen.

We have learned this week that if we choose to avoid the challenging work of listening to ourselves, often we will prolong any difficulty we are facing. We have also learned that the choices we make regarding how we listen to ourselves set the patterns we have for listening to God, and listening to others.

So as we rest on this metaphorical hiker's bench, let's be gentle with ourselves, and celebrate and appreciate the inner work we have done this week. My hope is that our inner work will bear good fruit throughout the remainder of our journey through Lent.

Making It Personal: Reflecting back over this past week, what was it like to focus on listening to yourself? As we continue our focus on the theme of listening, is there one thing that you have learned so far that you want to be sure to hold on to throughout the remainder of this season of Lent?

The Second Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2021

I Will, With God's Help

by Malcolm McLaurin

Sometimes you can do everything right and things will still go wrong. The key is to never stop doing right.

—Lisa Carter, Starr's mom, *The Hate U Give*

Peter, Peter, Peter ...

Let me be honest here. In some ways ... in MANY ways, I find myself in the same boat as Peter. Wanting to deny the difficult, the scary aspects of discipleship. Peter was just being honest. He didn't fully connect the dots. Yes, he truly and deeply believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but his definition was pulled from human sources. His definition was one that was fashioned by the world in which he lived, not the one that Jesus was revealing. His thinking was based on another model for Messiah-ship, not Jesus's model. A Messiah who suffers? A Messiah who is rejected? A Messiah who is killed? These were not a part of Peter's idea of the Messiah. Peter's rebuking of Jesus reflects this. Peter's rebuking reflects his shock and his fear.

Like Peter, I am often left in disbelief and denial about where Jesus is calling me to go. And while I may not rebuke Jesus (WOW! What a bold move), I do choose not to listen. Or maybe it is that I choose to listen—not to my heart and soul—but to my desire and fears. Their messages are clear. They tell me to turn my eyes away from injustice. To ignore the pain of others. To worry about me and mine. Their messages tell me that the material is the measure of worth. Their messages run counter to my baptismal promises. To seek and serve Christ in all, to love my neighbor and myself, to strive for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of everyone. The messages from my baptism are dangerous, while the former are safe and comfortable.

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

I am reminded of a book I read last summer, *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas. It is about a young black girl, Starr Carter, who, after witnessing a great injustice, is forced into making decisions between what is right and what is easy and comfortable. With each chapter we are witness to her struggles to make the right decision, but fear and the loss of comfort make a worthy opponent. While her decision did not ultimately shield her from danger and discomfort, it freed her to live the life she was being called into. It freed her to truly live.

Both Starr and Peter remind me that listening to and following Jesus, also known as discipleship, will often take us to places and situations that aren't comfortable. Following Jesus often involves moving against the grain of the world around us. But following Jesus—discipleship—always leads to new life.

I wonder if there are places where fear and discomfort are keeping you from responding to God's invitation to discipleship? During this season of Lent, how might you commit to a practice of deeper listening?



Monday, March 1, 2021

Listening to God Through Contemplative Practices

by Robbin Brent

Be still, and know that I am God.

—Psalm 46:10

In yesterday's reflection, Malcom McLaurin wrote about how following our baptismal promises can be dangerous. Yet, if we are willing to overcome our fear and listen to a deeper voice calling us to make the often-difficult choices, those choices will lead to new life. But how do we listen to God? The season of Lent offers us the perfect opportunity to engage with spiritual practices that help us to listen more deeply: to ourselves, to others, and to God. This week we shift from listening to ourselves to exploring several contemplative practices that can help us to be more faithful listeners to God.

Contemplative practices are intentional actions or activities that we do to connect more directly with the awareness of the Holy in our lives. Today we will begin by preparing. Following are a few ideas you might want to consider to help you get started.

- **Create a designated space in your home** for reading, reflection, practice, and prayer. You may want to keep a journal here, as well as some meaningful items that remind you of your intention.
- **Bring an open mind and heart, and start small.** We will be listening with the “ears of our hearts,” listening from a place of openness, curiosity, kindness, and vulnerability. And even spending just a few minutes a day in silence, resting in the arms of God, will be valuable.
- **Seek the support of others.** You can invite others to read and reflect with you, or you could join our Lenten retreat private group on Facebook (learn more at livingcompass.org/lent).

Making It Personal: Have you had, or do you currently have, a regular spiritual practice? Which of the suggestions in this reflection have you already tried or want to try? How might you reengage, or deepen, that practice?

Tuesday, March 2, 2021

Listening Distractions & Remedies

by Robbin Brent

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

—1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

We are bombarded with an ever-increasing array of messages, media, and many other distractions. Taking just one medium as an example—websites—we've witnessed a staggering increase from 2.5 million websites in 1998 to over 1.5 billion in 2018. Compounding this is our growing tolerance for noise and distraction, both internal and from the outside world, and the role our culture plays in creating distractions. How can we hear God while facing so many obstacles to listening? How can we create space in which to listen to God?

From the Scripture quote above, we are given three trusted remedies for our distractions: prayer, gratitude, and rejoicing. Most of us are comfortable giving thanks in prayer for our blessings, yet our prayers can also offer a safe place to name the things that are getting in the way of our awareness of God's presence. Scripture encourages us to be grateful *in* all things, not necessarily to be grateful *for* all things. A daily practice of gratitude can help to create a safe space in which to notice both what keeps us in the flow of God's love and desires for us, and what pushes us out of that flow.

A gratitude practice can offer us room to discover what touches our hearts and the hearts of others, what inspires a lasting joy, and what allows us to listen more deeply for the ways our prayer joins with God's prayer in every area of our lives.

Making it Personal: Take a few minutes to write down a few things for which you are grateful. Then, take a few moments to consider the idea expressed in today's reflection, that we can choose to find gratitude *in* all things, not necessarily *for* all things. Is there anything getting in your way of looking for authentic sources of gratitude in your day? If this was a meaningful practice, you might consider keeping a daily gratitude list for the remainder of Lent.



Wednesday, March 3, 2021

Listening Through Discernment

by Robbin Brent

*To “listen” another’s soul into a condition of disclosure
and discovery may be almost the greatest service that
any human being ever performs for another.*

—Douglas Steere

While many are used to hearing the word *discernment* as it relates to vocation or big decisions, I’d like to invite us to a way of engaging with the act of discernment in every area of our lives. Not only does the practice of discernment around the little things add up to the overall quality of our lived experiences, when we are able to use discernment in the “small” areas of concern, we are better able to call on this powerful practice when facing life’s larger or harder turning points.

Today we’ll explore the practice of Examen, which is simply a way of paying attention, of listening to God. The Daily Examen is an ancient and powerful way of reflecting on the day so that we can more clearly identify how and where God has shown up in our lives, and where God may be guiding us. We can apply this process to all the places in our lives that were touched during the day: from how we treated our loved ones as well as strangers, to how we tended to our money, our well-being, to how we showed up for the people and situations that we hold most dear.

Here is a brief description of the daily Examen, adapted from ignatianspirituality.com, to help you get started. At the end of the day, sit quietly for a few minutes, seeking God’s presence. Then:

- Review the day with gratitude, highs and lows.
- Pay attention to all of your emotions.
- Choose one moment from the day that stands out and pray from it.
- Look toward tomorrow, and then give everything to God to hold while you rest.

Making It Personal: If you engaged with this practice, were you surprised by anything that came up? Any new awarenesses, insights, inspiration, remorse? Is there anything you feel ready to do based on what you learned from this practice?

Thursday, March 4, 2021

Silence and Listening

by Robbin Brent

*I found I had less and less to say, until finally, I became silent,
and began to listen. I discovered in the silence the voice of God.*

—Soren Kierkegaard

St. John of the Cross was first credited with the saying “Silence is the first language of God.” Thomas Keating went on to add, “Everything else is a poor translation. In order to understand this language, we must learn to be silent and to rest in God.” We can’t fully appreciate the importance of listening without valuing the importance of silence. It is in the silence where we discover how God is present and active in our lives, and where we grow our trust in the ways God speaks to us.

Today we will explore the practice of Intercessory Prayer as one way to listen more deeply to God. This contemplative prayer practice can help us to more clearly sense how we are all connected through God’s longings and desires: for us, for others, for the world.

I pray the following intercessory prayer questions,* calling God “Beloved of my heart,” but feel free to use whatever name for God resonates in your heart.

Beloved of my heart,

- *what is your prayer, your deepest desire, for me/this person/this situation?*
- *what do you want my prayer to be for myself/this person/situation?*
- *what, if anything is getting in my way of joining more fully and freely in your prayer for me/this person/this situation?*
- *are there any boundaries I have created in my heart that I now need to relinquish?*
- *is there anything you would have me say or do on your behalf?*

Making It Personal: If you engaged with this practice, which questions resonated most with you at this time in your life? Is there one you’d like to write down to return to later?

*These questions were part of a Shalem seminar on Intercessory prayer and were inspired by the contributions of Rose Mary Dougherty.



Friday, March 5, 2021

Listening to the Wisdom of the Body

by Robbin Brent

It is amazing how many hints and guides and intuitions for living come to the sensitive person who has ears to hear what his body is saying.

—Rollo May

Scott Stoner wrote about the wisdom of the body in week one, and last Sunday Malcolm McLaurin wrote about the powerful story of Starr Carter in *The Hate U Give*. I would highly recommend the movie too, where we see Starr learn to trust what she knows deep down in her body to be her deepest truth.

“The body doesn’t lie,” “The body keeps score,” “I just knew in my gut,” are just some of the well-known phrases we either say or hear related to how information and knowing are first perceived at the level of the body. And one of the best ways to listen more closely to what God is telling us through our bodies is through the breath. On average, we take 20,000 breaths every day, or 960 breaths every hour. Today we’ll work with the practice of noticing as a way to tap into God’s desire for our well-being through the wisdom of the body and our breath.

You can do this simple practice anytime, anywhere. Begin by paying attention to your breathing. Notice your inbreath and your outbreath. Don’t alter anything about your breathing, just notice it. After several breaths, when you feel ready, do a quick body scan and notice any areas of tension in the body. See if you can relax your face, your tongue, your shoulders, your toes. Notice where you are holding tension and then notice what happens to your breathing as you consciously release the areas of tension. You can also practice this when facing a challenging decision or situation. God often will reveal insight and wisdom when we take the time to listen to our bodies.

Making It Personal: How does paying attention to your body support listening to what God desires for you? Did you find a relationship between releasing tension in the body and in your breath? Remember that you can return to this practice anytime you want to access the wisdom of the body.

THE SECOND WEEK IN LENT

Saturday, March 6, 2021

We Did It!

by Robbin Brent

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 and 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.

—Frederick Buechner

I was talking with a dear friend recently, whining really, about my overwhelming to-do list, personal and professional, and some frustrating relationship challenges. After a thoughtful pause, he asked, “How are you kind to yourself?”

As I was considering the question, I realized that I don’t often take time to celebrate completions, wins, or milestones. I found myself asking, “What if, rather than seeing work extending outward toward a horizon without end, I chose instead to savor the journey, the process rather than the product, the millimeters rather than the miles?” I made a commitment to pause and celebrate after I completed something before moving on to the next item on my list. As I began this practice, I noticed a few subtle but significant shifts. I was able to better discern and appreciate the ways God’s presence was animating every area of my life, and I began to notice more ease and hopefulness in my day, less tension and worry.

When I shared this with another friend and asked her how she was kind to herself, she came up with the brilliant idea to start a “We did it!” folder. She writes her completions on a piece of paper that she keeps in the folder to help her remember and celebrate all that she has accomplished. And now I have one too. The “We” in the title is a perpetual reminder that we are never alone. We’re not alone in our struggles, and we’re not alone in our celebrations.

Making It Personal: What do you think about creating a “We Did It!” folder for the significant milestones in your life? Even if you don’t want to create a folder, can you think of any recent milestones, completions (projects, goals, dreams), or blessings that you want to celebrate?

The Third Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2021

Wake up and Listen

by Randall Curtis

Never miss a good chance to shut up.

—Will Rogers

I have never been called a man of few words. And at 44 years old, it is a safe gamble that I will never have that said about me. You see, once a year I tell myself that I am sure it would make me a better person to go out in a tent and just be quiet for a while. I have seen other people more “spiritual” than me do this and it seems to work great for them. Surely this is the key.

Wind, bugs, running water, my fidgeting around trying to get comfy, the inevitable scream from some poor camper far away from me as they swat another mosquito. This is not a quiet place. Often I am amazed at just how loud everything is. I wonder what am I doing wrong.

But I listen.

I admit I have not learned from these annual trips how to be silent, quiet, and still. In fact, it typically takes another year for me to talk myself into doing it again. But what I have learned from the loud forest is that so much is going on in the world and I never listen to it at all.

These trips have been God slapping me in the face, telling me that all of this is going on around me in my everyday life. Wake up and listen.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus walks into a temple and starts throwing over tables. He is telling people to listen to what is going on around them. It could be said that his whole life was about telling everyone to look outside themselves and listen to their neighbors and love the people around them.

I have been blessed recently to be a part of an eye-opening small group on race and justice, and in these gatherings I have come to realize that I

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haven't been listening for a long time. As a white heterosexual man, I was doing what I could to be a good person while people around me didn't have the same opportunities and chances to do good in their own lives. I wasn't noticing that they weren't in the discussion or even at the table. Like in the forest, it was not about being quiet, but about listening.

What is going on around you today that you are not listening to?



Monday, March 8, 2021

Listening to Our Neighbor

by Scott Stoner

It could be said that Jesus' whole life was about telling everyone to look outside themselves and listen to their neighbors and love the people around them.

—Randall Curtis

In his reflection yesterday, Randall Curtis beautifully introduced our theme for this week of “listening to our neighbor.” Along with focusing on the current theme, I’d like to note that continuing any of the contemplative practices that Robbin Brent introduced last week will enhance our ability to hear God’s call to listen to and love our neighbor. And as we connect more deeply with the Holy in our lives, a natural fruit of that connection will be to more deeply and genuinely listen to our neighbor.

Jesus taught us that one of the great commandments is to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The reality is that we do tend to do just that. For example, if we are impatient and critical with ourselves, we will tend to be impatient and critical with others. And if we are kind and forgiving of ourselves, we will tend to be that way with others, as well.

As I wrote in an earlier reflection in this devotional, I believe there is a similar connection between how we listen to ourselves and how we listen to our neighbors.

We will discover just how hard it is to truly listen to our neighbors, especially when we disagree with them, or when listening to them requires us to stretch outside our comfort zones. But as we see in the Gospel passage for yesterday about Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers, Jesus sometimes has a way of challenging us to listen in ways that can make us uncomfortable.

I pray that we will grow in our ability to listen to our neighbors this week.

Making It Personal: What do you think of the idea that listening to others is an act of love? What do you think of the idea that we can’t fully love someone until we are willing to truly listen to them? If you asked people who know you well, do you think they would affirm that you are a good listener?

THE THIRD WEEK IN LENT

Tuesday, March 9, 2021

Offering the Gift of Listening

by Scott Stoner

*I've learned that people will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did, but people will
never forget how you made them feel.*

—Maya Angelou

We all have had the experience of someone pretending to listen to us. A common example of this is when we are in a group gathering and the person we are talking with is busy looking over our shoulder to see who they want to speak to next. Or when we respond to someone who asks how we are doing with an honest answer, and they change the subject because they don't actually want to hear how we are really doing. Neither of these experiences makes the speaker feel valued.

We have each also had the experience of someone offering us the gift of their full attention and being truly present to us. In those moments, we feel like the most important person in the world to the other person, and we likely will remember that affirming experience for a long time.

All of us know someone in our lives who could benefit from the gift of our listening to them right now. Perhaps they are going through a difficult time or are feeling alone. As we focus this week on listening to our neighbor, perhaps each of us could reach out to a neighbor near or far and offer them the gift of our full attention. The neighbor could even be someone in our own family.

When we offer the gift of listening to others, to paraphrase Maya Angelou, “they may not remember what we said or did, but they will always remember how we made them feel.”

Making It Personal: Can you think of a time when someone listened to you with their full attention? How did that make you feel? To whom might you offer the gift of being fully attentive today?



Wednesday, March 10, 2021

Listening to Understand

by Scott Stoner

The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply.

—Stephen Covey

One of the reasons I believe that deep, authentic listening is rare is that it is challenging to do. It takes time, discipline, intention, and effort to be fully present to another person when they are speaking to us. It is challenging not to be distracted. We have to truly focus our full attention on what they are sharing, working not to be drawn away by what is going on around us. We have to quiet ourselves internally, putting away our own thoughts and concerns for the moment. We have to listen with the intent to truly understand, instead of merely listening to reply. We have to avoid the temptation to steer the conversation back to our own lives and our concerns. And we have to offer the invaluable gift of our time and care.

Perhaps another reason we often avoid genuinely listening to one another, in addition to the intention, time, and effort it takes, is that there is a certain kind of vulnerability in truly listening. When we genuinely listen to another person, our perspective may be changed, and we may gain a more profound respect for the person to whom we are listening. Interestingly enough, the words *conversation* and *conversion* share the same etymological root. To listen deeply and to enter into authentic conversation with another person creates the possibility that we may be changed. We risk being converted in some way when we engage in a conversation where we are committed to practicing attentive listening.

When we listen to understand rather than simply reply, we create the opportunity for growth and change for ourselves, as well as for the person with whom we are connecting.

Making It Personal: What are your thoughts on the Covey quote that we often listen to reply rather than to understand? How does his quote speak to you personally? Can you think of a time when you listened deeply to someone and you were changed by what you heard?

Thursday, March 11, 2021

Listening Instead of Othering

by Scott Stoner

Compassion isn't just about feeling the pain of others; it's about bringing them in toward yourself. If we love what God loves, then, in compassion, margins get erased. "Be compassionate as God is compassionate," means the dismantling of barriers that exclude.

—Father Gregory J. Boyle

“Othering” may be a new word for you, but it describes a human tendency that has been around for all of time. Othering is when we choose to prejudge someone because we believe them to be completely other than us, and therefore not of equal value. We can other people based on their race, politics, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or disability—just to name a few conditions for othering.

Jesus was scandalous to many, including the religious authorities of his day, because he challenged the barriers created by othering in his culture. For example, when Jesus meets a Samaritan woman drawing water from a well and is willing to enter into a conversation with her. The woman, shocked, asks “How is it that you, a Jew, has a drink with me, a woman of Samaria?” (John 4:9). It was common practice then that Jews and Samaritans othered each other, and thus chose not to interact with one another.

Who among us has not prejudged someone because they are different from us? The remedy for this kind of prejudice, this kind of othering, is to commit instead to listening to our neighbor even, or especially, when this kind of listening stretches us. Jesus is our model for doing this. Time and time again we see that when Jesus befriends the “other,” what follows is some kind of profound healing and transformation. Imagine the healing that could happen in our world if we all strove to do the same.

Making It Personal: What speaks to you most in this reflection? Are you aware of ways in which you fall short of loving a neighbor in your life because of prejudice or othering? If so, what steps might you take to change this?



Friday, March 12, 2021

Listening to Our Family and Friends

by Scott Stoner

During my two years researching a book on listening, I learned something incredibly ironic about interpersonal communication: The closer we feel toward someone, the less likely we are to listen carefully to them.

—Kate Murphy

It is ironic that sometimes the people we struggle to listen to are, in fact, the people with whom we are closest. Kate Murphy, author of the best-selling book, *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters*, tells us that researchers have a name for the difficulty we have listening to those we know best. It's called closeness-communication bias.

Closeness-communication bias means that we think we already know what someone is going to say before they even finish speaking and so we listen half-heartedly. It is a different kind of judgement as it is not based on someone being different from us, but because we think we already know what they would think and say. This type of bias can happen in families, friend groups, and the work place.

In a recent counseling session, a couple shared a powerful insight. They described that when they are each with their friends, they focus on being exceptionally good listeners, asking questions that draw their friends out, and being genuinely curious about what their friends have to say. They went on to reflect that they rarely extended that same kind of openness and attentiveness to each other, and vowed to make a change. Without using the term, they were recognizing that they had fallen into the rut of closeness-communication bias.

Sometimes it is hard to listen to the neighbor in our lives who is far away from us. And sometimes it is even harder to listen to the neighbor who is the closest of all to us.

Making It Personal: What stood out for you in this reflection? Is there a friend, family member, or colleague with whom you regularly interact that you want to listen to with a fresh curiosity and openness? How might your new type of listening change that relationship?

THE THIRD WEEK IN LENT

Saturday, March 13, 2021

Different Kinds of Fasting

by Scott Stoner

Fast from words and be silent so that you can listen.

—Pope Francis

Giving something up for Lent is a traditional practice observed by many. Fasting as a Lenten discipline also has a long tradition, which is where the idea of giving something up comes from. When a person takes on the practice of fasting, it is not to experience deprivation but rather to practice the discipline of delaying gratification, which is an essential factor in all dimensions of wellness. Fasting also helps to heighten the awareness of the nature of one's true hunger, helping to clarify our need or hunger for spiritual, emotional, and relational wellness.

A few years ago, Pope Francis suggested the following list of things from which we can fast.

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so that you can listen.

Lent is an ideal time to be more intentional about holding fast to the habits, beliefs, and practices that ground and secure our lives.

Making It Personal: Have you given up anything for Lent this year? If so, how is that going for you? What are you learning as a result? Do you see a connection between any of these fasts with this week's theme of listening to our neighbor?

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2021

Listening for Mercy

by Heidi J. Kim

Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.

—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

As a lay person related to theologians, I find the task of reflecting on Scripture to be daunting. This week's Gospel, prevalent in the end zones of football games, is even more intimidating as it is so well known. I actually thought about Googling what some biblical scholar had written and then putting my own spin on their wisdom. Then I thought about my sixth-grade students and the fact that I was holding myself to a standard of perfection that I would never demand of them. In fact, I was holding myself to a standard that even God would not demand of me.

The tyranny of perfectionism permeates our contemporary culture, and it is relentless. I see it in my students who feel pressured to perform in ways that may not align with their personal learning goals. I see it in my colleagues who heroically return to hybrid and distanced classrooms trying to build relationships and community with students even when the technology fails. I see it in myself as an educational leader confronting the twin pandemics of COVID and systemic racism; because I am so busy responding to everything, it feels like I'm accomplishing nothing.

I see it in people of faith who have responded to social, economic, epidemiological, and environmental challenges with love and compassion, who still feel anxious and defeated. I think this relentless perfectionism is one of the ways that we have embraced darkness in our time. I spend far too much time regretting what I have not yet done, and this gets in the way of my doing what I can. It's exhausting and antithetical to what I claim to believe as a Christian. And if I can lack compassion for myself, it permits me to lack compassion for others. I wonder if the extreme polarization of our time—the mistrust and antipathy that are expressed

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

toward others who do not worship or vote as we do—is an outgrowth of that dark and sinful focus on perfectionism.

The readings for today tell a story of God’s mercy for us, in all of our sinfulness and imperfection. They remind us that we have been saved by faith, not by our own doing, but as a gift from God. That when we do what is true, our deeds will have been done in God. In these times when so many of us are striving to do what is not perfect, but true, may we remember to listen for God’s mercy and grace for our imperfect humanity. How might we let go of “perfect” to embrace what is well and true?



Monday, March 15, 2021

Listening as an Act of Mercy and Love

by Robbin Brent

*Mercy is the absolutely indispensable lintel over
which you step into the heart of God.*

—Cynthia Bourgeault

This week we will focus on the theme of listening as an act of mercy and love. My initial understanding of mercy was that it was something God, or others, bestowed on me, feeling sorry for me or in some ways pitying me, and deciding to give me another chance. Mercy was something I was lucky to get. While my understanding of mercy has matured, it wasn't until my teacher, Cynthia Bourgeault, unpacked mercy at a Wisdom School that something cracked wide open in my being.

In a teaching on the Divine Exchange, Cynthia referred to Helen Luke's contributions to exchange in Helen's book, *Old Age*. She shared that Helen understood mercy as a holy act of exchange, something of value both given and received. This, based on the root for the word "mercy" being *merc*, the root also forming the words *commerce* and *merchant*, words that at one point were associated with respect and dignity, although less so now. Helen goes on to trace the deeper root of the word "exchange,"—connected with the French *merci*, with "grateful response and kindness of heart," and finally to *compassion* and *forgiveness*, where we are able to open ourselves to the Mercy that frees all faults, which is the ultimate exchange."

This idea of mercy being an exchange that "frees all faults" relates beautifully to what Heidi Kim wrote yesterday, "may we remember to listen for God's mercy and grace." That God listens to the innermost longings and struggles we express through our prayers, both spoken and silent, and responds with renewing, hopeful, and redemptive mercy, grace, and love.

Making It Personal: What is your current understanding of mercy? Do you see how listening can be an act of mercy? Of love? In a prayer, or perhaps in something you write, what words might you use to convey your desire to join your heart with God's heart?

THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

Tuesday, March 16, 2021

The Power of Story

by Robbin Brent

*Because we fail to listen to each other's stories, we
are becoming a fragmented human race.*

—Madeleine L'Engle

I have always loved stories. The greatest legacy I hope to leave to my grandson is a love of story, of listening deeply to his, and of sharing my own with him. I like to think that when we are sharing stories, we are listening for the wonderful ways God is showing up in our lives through our hearts and through our imaginations.

From ancient times through the present moment, wise people have known that the power of story rests in its ability to carry messages directly to the heart. Important messages shared through stories of struggle, of divides seemingly too wide to bridge, of timeless wisdom, enduring love, hope, mystery, magic, and of mercy. Stories connect us to the common ground we share beneath any differences that threaten to divide us.

It is through our stories that we come to know and to name our deepest desires and longings, our gifts and our needs, how we want to move and be in the world. Stories can be where we discover and share underlying currents, events, and themes in a treasure hunt for spiritual breadcrumbs, where we witness for one another the ways God is always present and active in our lives.

Making It Personal: Who is God asking you to listen to right now as an expression of love? Do you find it easier to consider both sides of a situation when you are listening to a story well told? Have you used storytelling as a way to help others better understand you, your hopes and your fears, your struggles and your celebrations?



Wednesday, March 17, 2021

Prayer as a Path to Love

by Robbin Brent

In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there.

—Thomas Merton

The quote from Thomas Merton reminds me of Dorothy's journey in *The Wizard of Oz*. With the ruby slippers, she could have clicked her heels together three times at any point and been home. But not knowing this, she embarks on a dramatic journey filled with danger, fear, beauty, darkness, friendship, and hard-won wisdom. At the end, she and her friends learn that what they most longed for, what they thought they lacked that only the wizard could provide, they already possessed. Merton is saying something similar about using the “ruby slippers” of our prayers to help us remember and return to the abundance we already have, but may have forgotten.

Let's return to the intercessory prayer questions introduced in week two as one form of prayer that can help us to more fully join our prayer with God's prayer for us. From this place we can deepen the connections we already have, and offer prayers for mercy, compassion, and love, for ourselves and on behalf of those whom we love, and for those with whom we are in community.

- *Beloved of my heart, what is your prayer, your deepest desire for me/this person/this situation?*
- *What do you want my prayer to be for myself/this person/situation?*
- *What, if anything, is getting in my way of joining more fully and freely in your prayer?*
- *Is there anything you would have me say or do on your behalf?*

Making It Personal: If you practiced this way of praying, did you receive any insights or guidance? If you prayed on behalf of another person or group, did that change your thoughts or feelings about them in any way? You might want to write down your responses, or share them in a conversation with a trusted friend or family member.

THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

Thursday, March 18, 2021

Letting Go and Letting God

by Robbin Brent

Go out of yourself and let God be God in you.

—Meister Eckhart

Last Sunday Heidi Kim explored the “relentless tyranny of perfectionism” and the harm it has done, individually and communally. She shared that spending far too much time regretting what she hasn’t done gets in the way of her doing what she can. She ended by asking, “How might we let go of “perfect” to embrace what is well and true?”

I keenly relate to Heidi’s description of perfectionism as a relentless tyranny. I would add to that the tyranny of busy-ness in order to mask my fears about how well I am doing in life. It seems like no matter how hard I work on a project, problem, or relationship (or worry about the situation while procrastinating), I often second-guess myself and the sufficiency of my efforts. This has softened over the years as I have patiently addressed this painful tendency, and now, instead of an underlying driving cadence of next, and next, and next, I more often experience a sense of ease and openness. To move from relentless tyranny to freedom and a place of spaciousness in which we shift from “Here I am God,” to “Here we are.”

The season of Lent offers us an opportunity to reflect on essential questions. We may want to consider how to let go of perfectionism in order to be more available to all that God desires to offer through us. To ask what do we need to let go of in order to more freely enter God’s prayer for us? What do we need to let go of in order to be freer to love others in God with all of our heart, with all of our soul, with all of our strength, and with all of our mind?

Making It Personal: Can you think of a recent situation that has been impaired by the relentless tyranny of perfectionism? What questions would you like to ask God right now? Do you have a trusted friend or small group where you can share your journey and what you might want to let go of during this season of Lent?



Friday, March 19, 2021

Listening Through Creation

by Robbin Brent

*Those who dwell among the beauties and mysteries
of the earth are never alone or weary of life. ... Those
who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves
of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.*

—Rachel Carson

I discovered the opening quote in one of my favorite books honoring creation, *Earth's Echo*, by Robert Hamma. In this book he explores ways to listen for God in the world around us, how to be present, and how to notice. During this time of great uncertainty, turbulence, loss, and change, I take refuge in two places where I am able to remember God's mercy and love: by the ocean and in the mountain woods. Oceanside, the rhythm of the tide, the moon's phases, and the rise and fall of the sun, are a steady source of comfort, inspiration, a place where I experience a deepening of trust in God's bounty. All I have to do is to show up and pay attention.

In the mountains, it is a walk to an ancient pine tree deep in the woods near my home. Every step I take toward the tree, I am aware of the fidelity of nature to be exactly what it was created to be. It rekindles my desire to listen more deeply for all the ways God lets me know who I am created to be in this world.

A contemplative practice I often engage with in these two places is walking meditation. As I walk, I follow my breathing and sense my feet making contact with the ground. I try to notice when each foot leaves the ground, and the moment they return to the ground. When I get distracted, I just come back to my breath and to my feet. I end with a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of fully sensing my body in the present moment in God's glorious creation.

Making It Personal: Do you have a favorite place in nature where you are more free to notice all the ways God expresses love for you, and for all of creation? If you aren't able to travel to that place, do you have mementos you could place in your prayer space? It could be freshly fallen leaves, sea shells, acorns, rocks, fruit/veggie, flowers, etc.

THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

Saturday, March 20, 2021

The Fruit of Listening

by Robbin Brent

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. ... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

—Galatians 5:22-23,25

As we come to the end of the fourth week in Lent, let's look at the theme for the week, listening as an act of mercy and love, through the lens of the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5. These fruit join with mercy and love to form a powerful foundation on which rests a vibrant life in God. Where, as Jesuit priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin expressed so beautifully, we can trust in the slow work of God.

These fruit give us the guidance we need to slow down so that we can show up in the present moment, the only moment in which we can sense the presence of God. We will need that guidance and support when we show up in the moment and discover unjust suffering and othering inflicted on our neighbors, as Scott Stoner wrote about in week three. And when we feel compelled to stand up and speak out in response to the suffering and division we witness, we can stand strong and faithful in our truth. We will know first-hand the freedom of spirit that is born from our desire to both speak and listen faithfully, trusting that what knits us together is stronger than what threatens to divide us. Malcolm McLaurin offered us a powerful example of this in his reflection in week two through the story of Starr Carter in *The Hate U Give*.

No matter what, we can trust that God is holding us all with infinite mercy and love that has been infused with the fruit of the Spirit. I can think of no more powerful map and compass for our journey: heart, soul, strength, and mind.

Making It Personal: Can you think of a time recently where you were compelled to listen to or speak out about a difficult issue? How did it go? If it didn't go well, could first grounding yourself in the fruit of the Spirit offer you support and guidance? Could they help you to be a more faithful listener and advocate?

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 21, 2021

Listening Along the Pilgrims' Way

by Donald Fishburne

I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

—Jeremiah 31:33b

At a time of expectation before the Passover, some Greeks wished to see Jesus, so Philip and Andrew took these pilgrim seekers to him. As Jesus prayed, a voice from heaven shared God's glory. Then the crowd heard Jesus say, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Jesus draws *all* people to himself—for our healing and salvation. But not without struggle. This would cost Jesus his life.

In the year since Ash Wednesday 2020 we've been on a journey. I would say a spiritual pilgrimage, deeper into the heart of God. We did not ask for the suffering and discord that began last year around the globe. But God has been with us all along the way. Perhaps this has been for you, as for me, a lean time of loss and grief, an extended wilderness time. For the longest time we have not been able to gather together around our Lord's table. But we heard our Lord's voice, and we listened. It's never too late to listen.

The Good News for me as we listen in this transformative pilgrim journey is that my prayer life and spiritual life have been broadened and deepened. My wife Sarah says my countenance and spiritual demeanor have changed. I'm more appreciative of the profound faith passed on to me by family, friends, mentors, and by members of the generations before. My ancestors, including literal Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower 400 years ago, were not perfect, nor am I, and now I have to reckon with that. At their worst, some were oppressors of one sort or another. At their best, they were pilgrims walking and sharing the way of faith.

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

In our day, we choose to take this journey with Jesus, who is guiding us toward Holy Week on a particular storm-tossed pilgrimage. All of us walk alongside Jesus, to mourn, to hope, and, through our faithfulness and our willingness to listen deeply to what this journey is telling us, to be lifted into his resurrected life.

This is the perfect season to invite others to journey with us through Lent toward Easter, as Jesus draws us to the cross and into eternal life and love. All we need to do is begin, right where we are.

Jesus hears and knows our needs and our struggles. Our joys and sorrows. Our fears, our yearnings, our hopes. Jesus desires to create in us clean hearts, loving us into the reign of God, overflowing with peace and joy.

Thank you, Jesus.



Monday, March 22, 2021

Listening in the Midst of Change

by Scott Stoner

Change can be scary, but you know what's scarier? Allowing fear to stop you from growing, evolving, and progressing.

—Mandy Hale

In yesterday's reflection, Donald Fishburne writes about the overwhelming changes that the last year has brought into all of our lives. He wrote openly about the grief and loss that he, and no doubt, all of us, have faced. He says that in the midst of all this change, he has experienced spiritual growth and that he is grateful for how this year has been a form of spiritual pilgrimage.

It was just a little over a year ago that our lives changed in ways we could never have imagined. Given a choice, most people would prefer stability over change, and so it's not uncommon to hear someone say that they really don't like change, particularly when it is unplanned. Whether we like it or not, this year has given us all more than enough opportunities to practice adjusting to change.

This week we will focus on listening in the midst of change. This theme is important because it is in the midst of any change that listening is often the most difficult to do. Change, especially when unplanned, creates anxiety, and anxiety tends to constrict our ability to listen well. It is worth noting in this context that the word *anxious* is derived from the Latin word *anguere*, which means to tighten or constrict.

This week we will focus on listening to the full range of our emotions when facing change. We will notice when we are constricting and feeling anxious. We will also notice what helps us to be open to listening to ourselves, one another, and to God, so that we can not only face change directly, but actually grow in the midst of it.

Making It Personal: Name a few changes that have been most significant for you in the last year. Did any of these changes cause you to constrict with anxiety and make it hard to be open to listening to yourself, others, or God? What, if anything, has helped you through this time?

Tuesday, March 23, 2021

Listening to Our Emotions in the Midst of Change

by Scott Stoner

*The walls we build around us to keep
sadness out also keep out the joy.*

—Jim Rohn

An essential clue about the current state of our emotional wellness is how comfortable we are feeling and expressing the full range of our emotions. Imagine that the full range of emotions exists on a scale from 0-10. Now think of 0-5 as the “unpleasant” emotions, like sadness, anxiety, worry, anger, and fear. Next, think of 6-10 as the “pleasant” emotions, such as joy, love, happiness, excitement, and peace.

Most of us are relatively comfortable feeling and expressing the 6-10 emotions, yet it seems many of us try to avoid feeling and expressing the 0-5 emotions. Here is an important insight regarding this range of emotions: if we block out the 0-5 emotions, we will soon notice that we feel far less of the 6-10 emotions. This is the truth being pointed to in the quote above from Jim Rohn.

Emotions are not good or bad, they simply are. They are like a thermometer, giving us a read on the world around us. Watch a young child and within thirty minutes you will notice that they are comfortable experiencing the full range of 0-10 emotions. They don't try to build walls around their feelings to protect themselves and don't get stuck in any one emotion. If we are willing to genuinely listen to and accept all of our emotions without judgment, we too, can avoid getting stuck in any one emotion. The key is to keep our emotions in motion, let them flow in and through us, and watch them pass like fall leaves on a river, floating downstream until they are out of sight, now just a memory.

Making It Personal: As you listen to the emotions you feel regarding the changes you have been dealing with in your life, what do you hear? Are you comfortable listening to and acknowledging the “unpleasant” 0-5 emotions? What about 6-10? What emotion(s) do you sense right now as you listen to yourself?



Wednesday, March 24, 2021

Listening to Others When They Are Dealing With Change

by Scott Stoner

If one gives answer before hearing, it is folly and shame.

—Proverbs 18:13

There is a connection between our capacity to listen to others' emotions and the capacity to listen to our own. Referring to the scale of emotions in yesterday's reflection, we will find that our capacity to listen to the "unpleasant" 0-5 emotions of others will be directly related to the ability to do the same with ourselves.

All of us know people who have suffered more than others this past year. The pandemic has hit some individuals and groups of people harder than others. We focused earlier in this devotional on the importance of listening to our neighbors. Being a faithful listener to our neighbors, those who have dealt with more than their share of change this year, is perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can offer them.

As the verse from Proverbs states, people who are grieving don't need us to give them answers. They probably don't need advice either. What they need is our loving and caring presence. What they need is for us to be comfortable listening to their grief, pain, and uncertainty. What they need is for us to be truly interested in hearing their real response when we ask, "So how are you doing right now?"

There is a beautiful quote from Henri Nouwen that describes the kind of listening and care people need from us when they are grieving.

The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing ... that is a friend who cares.

Making It Personal: How comfortable are you in simply listening to another's grief or sadness? Have you been a friend to someone who has faced a great deal of change during this past year? Is there someone right now to whom you feel called to reach out and listen?

THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

Thursday, March 25, 2021

Listening to God in the Midst of Change

by Scott Stoner

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

—Psalm 23:4, KJV

I discovered a concept called the J Curve a few years ago, and it has helped me to understand the challenges we face when we go through significant change. In the J Curve diagram you will see that, in the initial stage of change, we experience decreasing stability because we have lost the stability and comfort of what was, yet we don't necessarily know what is ahead. All we know is that we are experiencing some kind of falling, and this can be unsettling.

As we enter the bottom of the J Curve, it is now clear that we are not returning to the old normal, but we don't yet have a sense of what a new normal might look like. As we move to the J Curve's right side, we begin to experience renewed energy and a sense of new possibilities.

I have come to understand that the J Curve is also the Jesus Curve. It is the curve of loss and rebirth, of death and resurrection. To paraphrase Psalm 23, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of a J Curve, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

When I look back over my life, it is often in and through J Curves that my faith has deepened and grown the most. In his reflection last Sunday, Donald Fishburne made this exact point when he wrote, regarding this time of the pandemic, "My prayer life and spiritual life have been broadened and deepened."

Making It Personal: What J Curves have you experienced throughout the last year? Is there a J Curve that you are in the midst of right now? How has your faith helped you in these times of change?



Adapted from *The J Curve: A New Way to Understand Why Nations Rise and Fall* by Ian Bremmer.



Friday, March 26, 2021

Grief and Gratitude

by Scott Stoner

*The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand
and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them.*

—Francis Weller

Earlier this week I wrote about the full range of emotions that we naturally feel. Our feelings will undoubtedly range from the challenging feelings of grief and sadness to the more pleasant emotions of happiness and gratitude. As we think about the emotions we are likely to feel in the midst of significant change, grief certainly needs to be included.

Grief is an inevitable part of our lives because change is always happening in our lives. We all experienced times of grief and loss before the pandemic, and we will experience them again after the pandemic has passed. While none of us desires grief and loss experiences, they are part of the fabric of life. The choice we have then is how we will carry our grief.

Francis Weller, a well-respected psychotherapist and grief expert, provides helpful wisdom on how to carry grief. I will close with the full version of the above quote. His keen insight reminds us that when we take time to honor and listen to our grief, we will find that our capacity for compassion and gratitude are enhanced.

The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.

Making It Personal: In general, how comfortable are you with listening to and honoring grief—your own and others? What stands out to you in the Francis Weller quote, and how does that speak to you right now?

THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

Saturday, March 27, 2021

Listening Is Contagious

by Scott Stoner

*Good listeners are created as people feel listened to.
Listening is a reciprocal process—we become more
attentive to others if they have attended to us.*

—Margaret J. Wheatley

Two things we have learned from our experience of the coronavirus are just how interconnected we all are with each other, and how easily and quickly a virus can spread.

These two learnings can also apply to the transmission of our emotional states. Have you been part of a group where the leader was chronically negative and critical? I would guess the rest of the group's morale and spirit eventually became negative and deflated, as well. Compare that to how good it feels to be part of a group in which the leader is positive and supportive. These are but small examples of how strongly our moods and spirits can affect one another.

I coached youth soccer when our kids were growing up, and I remember playing several games against a team whose coach was a screamer, always yelling critical comments at his players. It is not surprising that the players on that team yelled at each other, and at the referee, more than any other team we ever played. Again, the spirit of the leader was contagious.

As Margaret Wheatley says in the quote above, "Listening is a reciprocal process—we become more attentive to others if they have attended to us." It turns out that listening is also contagious. Good listening invites good listening. If someone does not even pretend to listen to us, the chances are minimal that we will make much effort to listen in return.

When it comes to listening, the choices we make are contagious. The question is, what kind of listening are we sharing with others?

Making It Personal: What do you think of the idea that listening is contagious? Can you think of a recent example in which you noticed that listening (good or bad) was contagious? What kind of listening do you think you are sharing with others?

Palm Sunday

March 28, 2021

Listening With All Our Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

by Craig Phillips

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

—John 12:16

In the early morning I often sit with my coffee on the deck in my backyard and listen to the sounds around me. I've learned to identify the song of the male cardinal calling from the trees. I hear an owl still hooting an hour or so after the sun has come up. After a while, I hear an increase of traffic on the road nearby. All these sounds would be easy to miss if I did not create the time and space to listen to them. Listening to them brings me a sense of peace and joy.

On three occasions before his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus warned his disciples that he would be killed and after three days rise again, but “they did not understand him.” Their responses demonstrate that they were unable to hear what Jesus was telling them. They did not hear him, because they were not truly listening to him. They shut their ears to what they were unwilling to hear, that he in fact would be killed.

The Gospels portray Jesus fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! ... Lo, your king comes to you... humble and riding ... on a colt.” As Jesus rides into Jerusalem he hears the noisy expectations of the crowd. They shout, “Hosanna!”—“Save us now!” Some have hopes that Jesus will expel the Romans who occupy the land, and begin to rule an earthly kingdom as did their ancestor David. At the beginning of the week, the crowds greet Jesus with hopeful expectations, but by the end of the week, when he does not fulfill their hopes and dreams, the crowds turn on him screaming, “Crucify him,

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crucify him!” The sound of excited voices and expectations surround him, call out to him, but Jesus mysteriously remains silent. Jesus heard the clear expectations of the crowd yet remained intent on what he had to do, even as he recognized what would happen to him in Jerusalem.

Most of us know what it's like to be surrounded by other people's expectations of us. Sometimes they are realistic expectations, other times they are not. How do we listen to the expectations of other people without losing our own identity or being untrue to ourselves?

When we listen to the events of Holy Week with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, we encounter a wide range of human emotions from extreme sadness to overwhelming joy. If we can be attentive to the range of emotions we feel as we enter into that story, we open ourselves to being at one with the hope hidden in the inner ground of our being.



March 29, 2021

Pausing to Listen

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*All these sounds would be easy to miss if I did not
create the time and space to listen to them. Listening
to them brings me a sense of peace and joy.*

—Craig Phillips

On the way to the pool after one of those brief summer thunderstorms, my grandson asked, “Nana, can you hear the puddles splash?” While I’d heard the sound of splashing puddles many times, when my grandchild asked me to listen, I stopped and truly listened. And you know what? Puddles actually do splash. In my eagerness to get to the “good stuff” of pool-time, had I not paused to listen to a little voice, I’d have missed a wonderful moment. In his reflection yesterday, Craig Phillips wrote about the gifts of peace and joy we receive when we take the time to pause and listen.

Most of us have walked the days of Holy Week many times before and we know how the story of the week unfolds. Yet, in our culture’s eagerness to get to the “good stuff” of Easter, I wonder if we might be missing what is being declared to us in the moments of each day of Holy Week?

As we journey through this week, we are, once again, invited to pause and listen for any new things God might be declaring to us. Just as Craig’s backyard invited him to hear what was going on around him, and my grandson invited me to hear a new thing in splashing puddles, perhaps paying closer attention and listening to what we are experiencing in the present moment will allow us to notice what God is doing in our lives, this day, this week, and this Easter.

Making It Personal: Have you ever found yourself wanting to hurry through the discomfort of Holy Week for the “good stuff” of Easter? If yes, how might that get in the way of you hearing the things God is saying to you during this week? What is one thing you can do, or let go of, today in order to pause and listen?

TUESDAY IN HOLY WEEK

March 30, 2021

Known by Name

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples
from far away! The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.*

—Isaiah 49:1

One of the first things we want to know when a new child enters a family is their name. When someone we know begins a new relationship and it's looking serious, we want to know their name. Children begin to understand the significance and power of naming when they are invited into the process of naming the family pet. Many of us have strong preferences for, and associations with, our names or nicknames.

Choosing, knowing, and sharing a name moves us from a position of distance from a person to a closer relationship with a particular someone we know by name.

In business or professional circles, being invited to call someone by their first name, rather than by their title, shifts the nature of the relationship. If naming and knowing a name has this much power in our human relationships, just how much more astonishingly amazing is it that God always has, and always will, know us by name? We are the “much-loved Child of God.” And, what's most astounding and almost beyond comprehension is that God welcomes and longs for us to call God by name.

In our human frailty, even during those times when we stop calling on God, nothing we could ever do would cause our Creator to stop calling our name and longing for the sound of our response.

On this Tuesday in Holy Week, I invite you to pause for a few moments and open your heart to hear that you are a much-loved Child of God.

Making It Personal: How might you invite your heart to hear the reality that you are a much-loved Child of God? Reflect on the reality that God longs for the sound of our response. What is the name you call God? How did you come to know God by that name?



March 31, 2021

The iCloud of Witnesses

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,
and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*

—Hebrews 12:1

Several seasons ago, I referred to the people gathered in Facebook groups as the great iCloud of witnesses. Across cities, states, nations, and continents, we came together and experienced a taste of spiritual connection with people we'd never get to meet in any other way. We also have the opportunity in these circles to get a glimpse of the timeless connection we have with the great cloud of witnesses to whom St. Paul refers.

While it often seems, especially during the times in which we currently live, that connection can be tenuous, distant, and fractured, we have been reminded these last forty days that our connection is deep, strong, and it cannot be broken. Tomorrow, we transition from Lent into the three holy days that lead to Easter. Our time together will soon come to an official end and even though we won't be together in this same way, we will continue to know the blessing and depth of the authentic connection we have shared on our journey through Lent.

Wherever this Lenten journey has taken us, or will take us, we have the assurance that we are not alone and we never will be alone. The iCloud of witnesses in this time and place is connected to the timeless great cloud of witnesses and nothing can sever that tie. The love of Jesus, who will die and who will rise, binds us always and forever.

Making It Personal: Do you have a sense of how your journey has been shaped by those with whom you have shared this Lent? How do you experience spiritual connection in your daily life? How might you sustain or nurture that moving forward? What's it like to think of yourself as part of the great cloud of witnesses?

Maundy Thursday

April 1, 2021

Feet-Grab

by Martha Bourlakas

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

—John 13:34

Jesus did not need to see us with cell phones to know how humans would behave in 2021. The Son of God knew from the get-go how easily distracted we are, how we procrastinate the hard work of loving in favor of busy-ness, how it can be easier to lose our eyes in a screen than to have an eye-to-eye conversation. He knew we need pointed actions and stories to make us listen and attend to the larger, urgent love narrative. In today's Gospel, Jesus knows he does not have much time left, so he must synthesize his lessons. To teach his most critical commandment—*Love one another as I have loved you*—he gets intimate. He holds and cleans us where we are most dirty, most callused, most vulnerable: our feet.

During the pandemic quarantine, our family watched a lot of scary movies together. Our ritual—selecting the movie, popping the popcorn, digging up Junior Mints from the candy drawer, turning off the lights, lighting candles—seemed trivial at first, but then meaning appeared. The world outside our doors was suddenly so frightening and unpredictable that our grown children and their parents needed intense stories and characters to help us step away from reality, if only for two hours.

One of the horror movie tropes is the feet-grab. As soon as the protagonist is down on the floor, especially near a bed, under which scary demon-character hides, you know what's coming ... she is going to have her feet grabbed, and will be pulled rapidly into the void. *No no, no*, we scream, *it's your only chance! Get up, run away!* As if we hadn't experienced this plot point over and over, our family clung to each other. We squeezed each others' arms, held hands, covered each others' eyes, and laughed at our fears.

In this Maundy Thursday Gospel, Jesus knows the immediate future is going dark, that he is being pulled into a horrible human void. Jesus illustrates his urgent love lesson, stops us cold, by holding our feet. He does not focus on our bony bunions, but looks us in the eye and washes us in humility and love. *Cling to each other*, he says, *for it is in the intimacy, the love, you will find your way out of the darkness.*

Good Friday

April 2, 2021

Complicity

by Martha Bourlakas

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you
so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*

—Psalm 22:1

Today is a horrifying day. It is impossible and un-Christian and inhuman to move past it without acknowledging and understanding what happened. Today, we are eye-witnesses to the murder of Jesus Christ, and we are complicit because we are the descendants of this human family. In Psalm 22, we hear a cry, a scream: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?* Hearing someone else's screams, pleading in agony, is painful, and causes us to turn our heads, cover our ears. We say, *I wasn't there! I never would have been part of the mob! I never would have watched while Jesus died on the cross! Can't we just focus on the resurrection?* The glorious resurrection *will* come, but we are not there yet. Today, we are at the scene of violence, despair, and death, and we must attend.

Lynching—mob murder used to terrorize an entire race of people—occurred throughout the South and Midwest in the years of Reconstruction, following the Civil War. The Equal Justice Initiative, www.eji.org, has to date completed the most extensive research on lynching in America. EJI Director, author, and attorney Bryan Stevenson wrote, *"We cannot heal the deep wounds inflicted during the era of racial terrorism until we tell the truth about it."* When we read about lynchings or see pictures, we turn our heads, avert our eyes. We say, *I wasn't there! I never would have been part of the mob! I never would have watched while a human being was lynched!* But we did watch. From the *Lynching in America* report: *"At these often-festive community gatherings, large crowds of whites watched and participated in the Black victims' prolonged torture, mutilation, dismemberment, and burning at the stake."*

Thanks be to God, the mutilated body of Jesus Christ does not remain on the cross. We live and move toward justice through the Resurrection. Today, though, we must listen to the cries of Jesus, look straight into the eyes of evil and hatred, acknowledge our complicity, ask for forgiveness, and become better, Easter people. Let us pray we remember we are beloved descendants of one family of God, ancestors of all who will follow.

Holy Saturday

April 3, 2021

Hear the Cicadas

by Martha Bourlakas

*They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices
in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.
Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified,
and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one
had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of
Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.*

—John 19:40-42

Holy Saturday sounds quiet. Yesterday, we heard the loud anguish of chaos: yelling, crying, pleading, nailing, wailing. Today is different. We are heartbroken, left holding the dead body of our beloved Jesus Christ, and we hear a significant shift in tone. Peaceful phrases form the narrative: *clean linen, new tomb, myrrh and aloes, in the garden*. We know what's going to happen with Jesus, and ourselves, because we have read over and over what comes next, but we have to pay attention and hear *this* moment. On this Holy Saturday, we are all cried out, no tears left, but we are not yet in the Resurrection. We are still at the tomb. Quiet, in shock, not yet flowering the cross, not yet counting the eggs in our baskets, not yet eating our hot-crossed buns. It is in this quiet we become prepared for the glorious new life to come.

When I was growing up, our family would visit a graveyard on our yearly beach vacations. My parents loved the deep shade of the Spanish Moss and the history the tombstones taught. I saw it as needless time away from the sand and the ocean, but I was a kid, so I went along. Sweating and swatting mosquitoes, I read the dates of the babies and children and felt the childhood fear, *I hope nothing happens to me*. Then I would quickly move on, so as not to feel sadness too long. Nodding my head, *Yes, I get the history here*, but wondering, *How soon can we leave? I'm ready to play and have fun again*. Ten-year-old reflections of deeper human questions: *How*

As people of Jesus Christ, we must take this brief, suspended moment under the graveyard oak trees to reflect on the person we watched die on the cross. If we move too quickly to the celebration of Resurrection, we might miss, in all the noise, the space for the important tombstone questions: *Do I know, as much as possible, the person Jesus was? How will the life of Jesus make a difference in my life going forward? How will I show the love of Jesus in my other relationships? How will I live into the hope of rebirth?* By taking the time to sit with death, to look into the tomb, we find it is not as scary as we once thought. We learn from what was, and carry that knowledge into the salty ocean of our futures. Listen, and you will hear the cicadas sing songs of courage and hope.

Easter Sunday

April 4, 2021

Alleluia. Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

by Scott Stoner

Let anyone with ears listen!

—Matthew 13:9

The sounds of spring in the Northern Hemisphere are unmistakable. Birds singing, rain showers, the wind in the trees, and the sound of gurgling creeks, all announce the resurgence of life all around us.

The sounds of Easter are unmistakable too. Some of my favorite sounds of Easter include trumpets, bells, organ music, choir descants, children shrieking as they hunt for eggs, and loud acclamations that Christ is risen.

All around us, God is speaking to us of resurrection. The question, one that we have been reflecting on in our journey through Lent this year is, “Are we listening?” We have learned that one of the greatest gifts that we can give to one another is the gift of listening. We have learned that much of what passes for listening is not authentic listening, but instead superficial, almost a pretend kind of hearing, and that deep, authentic listening requires intentionality.

Today we are reminded of the gift of resurrection that God has promised us. The gift that we can give back to God is to truly listen to the story of Jesus’ resurrection with the ears of our hearts.

Jesus’ Parable of the Sower, while not usually associated with the celebration of Easter, is a profound description of what happens when we are open to listening to God. With the guidance of our guest writers, this Lent has been devoted to removing the rocks and thorns in our hearts,

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

My hope and prayer for all of us today is that through listening to the story of Easter anew, God will bring forth a harvest of resurrection in our lives and in the lives of those whom God calls us to love and serve.

Quotes, Scripture & Prayers for Use During Lent

Quotes

By being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanation.

—Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*

A listening heart is always open, sensitive to the joy and pain of others, offering a space within itself for the other to enter. It gives each person what is so badly needed—an affirmation of their place in this world.

—Eliezer Shore

*No one listens, they tell me, and so I listen ...
and I tell them what they have just told me,
and I sit in silence listening to them,
letting them grieve.*

—Julian of Norwich

*Listen, attune, and heed the inner Voice of Love.
For in sacred Silence, we open ourselves
to Wisdom,
to ever deepening communion with
the Source of all creation.*

—Nan Merrill



Listening is where love begins.

—Mister Rogers

Listen, listen

Wait in silence listening

For the one from whom all mercy flows.

—Contemplative chant

Everyone is God speaking. Why not be polite and listen to Him?

—Hafiz

*Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning,
that without listening speaking no longer heals, that without distance
closeness cannot cure.*

—Henri Nouwen

*The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling
accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering
their own true selves.*

—Henri Nouwen

All wisdom was the result of listening to one's own soul.

—Paulo Coelho

The first duty of love is to listen.

—Paul Tillich

*Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you'd have
preferred to talk.*

—Doug Larson

QUOTES, SCRIPTURE & PRAYERS FOR USE DURING LENT

It's not at all hard to understand a person; it's only hard to listen without bias.

—Criss Jami

Good listeners are created as people feel listened to. Listening is a reciprocal process—we become more attentive to others if they have attended to us.

—Margaret J. Wheatley

The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions.

—Parker Palmer

Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.

—Parker Palmer

In the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair.

—Howard Thurman

“It’s impossible,” said pride. “It’s risky,” said experience. “It’s pointless,” said reason. “Give it a try,” whispered the heart.

—Anonymous

We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit.

—e.e. cummings



Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.

—Karl A. Menninger, American psychiatrist

There is a difference between truly listening and waiting for your turn to talk.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

*But what is it then that sits in my heart,
That breathes so quietly, and without lungs —
That is here, here in this world, and yet not here?*

—Mary Oliver

*All those years
forgetting
how easily
you can belong
to everything
simply by listening.*

—David Whyte, from *The Winter of Listening*

*Who are you?
Who
Are you? Whose
Silence are you?*

—Thomas Merton, from the poem *In Silence*

Scripture

*Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's
womb he named me.*

—Isaiah 49:1

*The Master, God, has given me a well-taught tongue, So I know how
to encourage tired people. He wakes me up in the morning, Wakes
me up, opens my ears to listen as one ready to take orders. The
Master, God, opened my ears, and I didn't go back to sleep, didn't
pull the covers back over my head.*

—Isaiah 50:4

For God alone my soul waits in silence.

—Psalm 62:1

*O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our
Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the
sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!*

—Psalm 95:6-7

Help, God—the bottom has fallen out of my life!

Master, hear my cry for help!

Listen hard! Open your ears!

Listen to my cries for mercy.

—Psalm 130:1-2, The Message



Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track. Don't assume that you know it all.

—Proverbs 3:6-7, The Message

Dear friend, listen well to my words; tune your ears to my voice. Keep my message in plain view at all times. Concentrate! Learn it by heart! Those who discover these words live, really live; body and soul, they're bursting with health.

—Proverbs 4:20-22, The Message

*Dear friend, pay close attention to this, my wisdom;
listen very closely to the way I see it.
Then you'll acquire a taste for good sense; what I tell
you will keep you out of trouble.*

—Proverbs 5:1-2, The Message

Where two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am there.

—Matthew 18:20

*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen,
slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's
righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth
of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has
the power to save your souls.*

—James 1:19-21

Prayers

O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Book of Common Prayer, p. 832

O heavenly Father, you give your children sleep for the refreshing of soul and body: Grant me this gift, I pray; keep me in that perfect peace which you have promised to those whose minds are fixed on you; and give me such a sense of your presence, that in the hours of silence I may enjoy the blessed assurance of your love; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

—Grace Cathedral

Merciful Jesus, you are my guide, the joy of my heart, the author of my hope, and the object of my love. I come seeking refreshment and peace. Show me your mercy, relieve my fears and anxieties, and grant me a quiet mind and an expectant heart, that by the assurance of your presence I may learn to abide in you, who is my Lord and my God. Amen.

—Grace Cathedral

The world is struggling mightily, and many are losing faith and hope. God we know that You have all the strength the world needs. We pray that You will encircle us in your deep peace, abiding hope, and eternal love. “The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.” Amen.

—Robbin Brent, quote by William Sloane Coffin

Living Well Through Lent 2021

*Listening With All Your
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

Designed for use as an individual reflection or for group study, this daily devotional provides a foundation for seeking a deeper experience of Lent, an experience that will help prepare us for the true meaning of Easter.

Includes reflections from:

- Martha Bourlakas
- Robbin Brent
- Randall Curtis
- Donald Fishburne
- Heidi Kim
- Jan Kwiatkowski
- Malcolm McLaurin
- Craig Phillips
- Lisa Saunders
- Scott Stoner
- Dawna Wall

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