

the DISCIPLINE of
DISCIPLESHIP
LENT SERMON SERIES
✝ MARCH 3
9AM | 11AM
LISTENING

Sunday, March 3, 2024
“*The Discipline of Discipleship*”
LISTENING | Mark 1:35-39 | Charlie Berthoud

Today, on this third Sunday in Lent, I’m thinking of Sesame Street and the letter of the day song. Today’s letter is L!

We like the letter L at Covenant.

Our calling Learning God’s Love and
Living God’s Love.

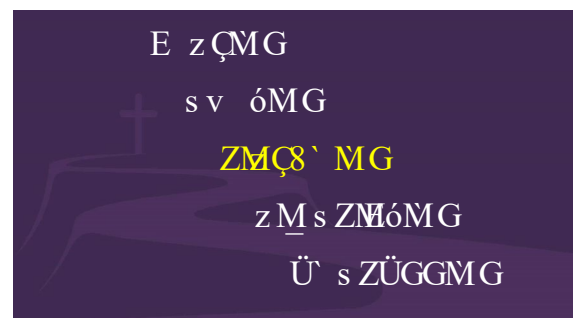
And during this season, we like L
even more, because it is LENT, and
among other things, Lent is a time
for LISTENING.



Lent is 40-day period, which starts on Ash Wednesday and continues through to Palm Sunday and then Easter Sunday, which is March 31 this year, four weeks from today.

Lent is a time for Christians to refocus and get
back on track.

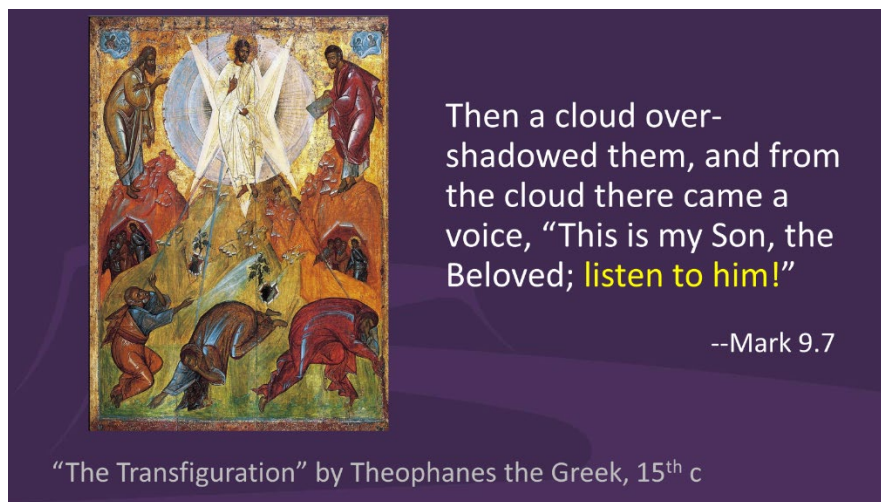
This year over the five Sundays before Palm
Sunday we are encouraging engagement with
any of five practices or disciplines of the
Christian life, with the hope that we would all
become more faithful Christians, better followers of Jesus.



Over the past two weeks, we focused on FASTING and PRAYING. Today we focus on
LISTENING.

Those of you who are very tuned into the liturgical year will know that the Sunday before Lent is Transfiguration Sunday, when we remember a curious biblical account of Jesus up on a mountain with Peter, James, and John, where Jesus is “transfigured”-- which means changed. They have an encounter with Moses and Elijah, and we’re told that Jesus is dazzling white, and they hear the voice of God.

Every year on the Sunday before Lent begins when we remember the Transfiguration, we hear God saying God says to the three disciples: This is my Son, the beloved. **Listen** to him.



So Lent is a time to be particularly tuned into the effort to **listen** to the words of Jesus, to listen for God’s word and to listen for guidance and direction on our faith journey.

The five practices or disciplines are in various ways meant to help us listen to God.

Last week we focused on prayer, and while we too easily think of prayer as a laundry list of requests, a big part of prayer is listening to God.

Fasting, Simplifying, and Unplugging are ways of getting rid of things that prevent us from hearing God. So, it seems right that **listening is right in the center** of our list of Lenten practices and disciplines.

Listening is hard. We are busy and we live in a noisy world, and we are easily distracted.

About 20 years ago, I signed up for a week-long spirituality retreat, sensing that I

needed some spiritual growth. The retreat promotional info emphasized prayer, with a variety of types of prayer.

I arrived a few minutes late. I entered the meeting room where about 25 people were sitting quietly in a circle, so I sat down. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, expecting to hear a spoken prayer and then to have a workshop and/or presentation about spirituality.

About a minute of silence later, I opened my eyes and looked around. Everyone else was sitting peacefully with their eyes closed. So, I closed mine again. A few minutes later, I looked around and it was the same. I started wondering who was in charge and when they were going to say something. More minutes passed. I got fidgety, and began thinking “Aren’t we going to DO anything? Did I really pay for this experience?”

After 20 very long minutes, someone said Amen. I thought, “Finally.”

That was my first experience of centering prayer, an ancient prayer form, and a wonderful way of opening ourselves and quieting ourselves, to let God speak to us.

While it was not a helpful experience for me at first, by the end of the week, I felt very comfortable and engaged in a 20- or 30-minute time of silent prayer. And since then, silent prayer has been a big part of my journey—when I make the time and space for it.

Our gospel reading for today, shows us that even Jesus needed make time and space for prayer, to listen for God, to get away from the noise.

To set the stage for our reading, which is toward the end of the first chapter of Mark, we should remember the beginning of Mark 1.

Early on we learn that John the Baptist is thrown in jail, and then Jesus proclaims this new reality, this kingdom of good news. He calls people to repent, to turn around. And then he invites people to follow him, to no longer fish for fish, but instead fish for people. He gives them new purpose, new focus in this new thing called the Kingdom of God.

After that in Mark 1, Jesus is very busy--teaching and healing. That brings us to our reading for day near the end of Mark 1, where Jesus realized he needed to reconnect

with God. Listen for God's word.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Thanks be to God for the words of scripture.

One way for us to take up the discipline of LISTENING is inspired by the gospel reading, and it involves trying to **block out some quiet time with God** —with prayer, Scripture, and silence.

Some people do this first thing in the morning. Some people sit quietly in their car for a few minutes before going into work or coming home. Some people schedule 5 or 10 minutes on their phone calendars and reflect on a daily Bible verse. Some people use daily devotionals—print or online.

Some people come to worship and are very intentional about saying to themselves, "In this hour, I am here to listen for God."

Many of us are super busy, so it's hard to make the time for this kind of listening. And even when we make the time, sometimes we get interrupted, just like Jesus was; did you notice? While he was trying to get away for prayer, the text says the disciples hunted him down.

We all need time apart, to rest and refocus, and reenergize. As Christians we need time and space to listen for God. When we carve out a little for listening to God each day, we'll find ourselves growing in faith, hope, and love, we'll find ourselves staying true to who we are.

If you don't have a regular time or way to connect with God, this is a good week to give that a try.

Knowing that this is hard, here at Covenant, we encourage each other. In January, we read the book of Exodus together, encouraging people to spend five or so minutes

reading one chapter and offering a prayer.

Next month, after Easter, we're going to read Acts, with hope of helping people cultivate a regular habit of checking in and listening to God through scripture during the month of April.

One of the biggest challenges to listening is all the noise in our world. Sometimes we have too many words around us, so finding **silence** is a good thing.

In the spirit of learning and listening, let's take **one minute** for silence right now.

During the silence, I invite you to take a few deep breaths. If you need a phrase to help you stay focused, or if you realize your mind has wandered, you could use the wonderful line given to the boy Samuel: "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Or you could use one of the simple prayers of Anne Lamont: "Thank you" or "Help me."

[Take a minute of silence]

A second way to listen for God is to be more intentional about **listening to people**. With all of our distractions and weariness and stress, sometimes, or maybe a lot of the time, we don't really pay attention to people around us, including people closest to us.

We don't like it when people don't listen to us, but are we good at listening to others?

David Brooks has a new book out, with the intriguing title: *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. I've only read a little bit of it, but I like what I read. In one section, he talks about listening, encouraging us to what he calls loud listeners.

"When another person is talking, you want to be listening so actively that you're practically burning calories. Watch Oprah Winfrey, a true mast of conversation, as she interviews someone. You can see her feeling, in her highly reactive way, the emotions, the other person is describing." (Page 75)

Are you a good listener? Most of us can improve in this department.

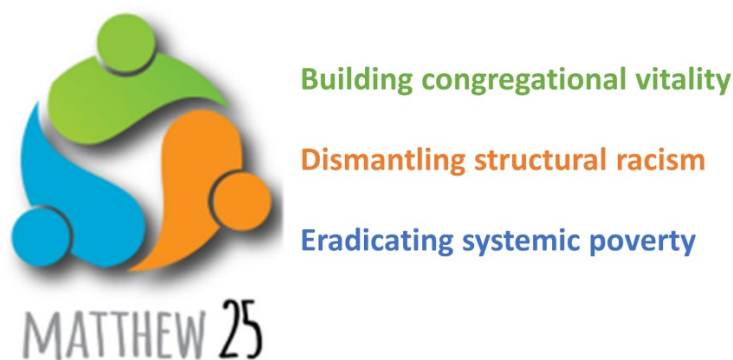
As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors. We are called to forgive, to be kind, to do unto others. A big part of that is listening.

We're also called, as the Brief Statement of Faith reminds us, to listen to the voices of people long silenced. The Statement affirms:

In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage

- to pray without ceasing,
- to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
- to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
- **to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,**
- and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

We're trying to do this with our Matthew 25 initiative, which includes paying attention to racism and poverty, listening to and learning from people dealing with racism and poverty.



God calls us to love another, to work for God's Kingdom. To do this effectively, we need to listen to people—our family and friends. People at school and work and in the neighborhood. And people whose voices we might not ordinarily hear.

So, we listen for God with quiet times, and by focusing on other people.

A third way to listen for God is through nature, or in music, or in novels, or even movies and TV.

From sunshine and the singing of birds, to stories of courage or healing or forgiveness, to Broadway tunes and top 40 music, we

Three invitations to LISTEN for God

1. Quiet times: scripture, prayer, silence
2. Focus on other people
3. In music, movies, novels, nature

can hear God speaking to us, if we listen.

In a simple and profound spiritual book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, we learn that Brother Lawrence was able to better connect with God while washing the dishes that while in formal prayer, that he cultivated the habit of tuning into God wherever he was.

After teaching his disciples about parables, Jesus said to them “If you have ears to hear, then hear!”(Mark 4:9) But listening to God isn’t just with our ears, it is mostly listening with our hearts.

The Good news for us as we try to listen is that God continues to speak, telling us that:

- We are God’s beloved children, no matter where we’ve been or what we’ve done
- We are called to new life and new purpose, following our teacher Jesus
- We can live with courage and hope, trusting in God’s abundant and eternal love.

God is speaking; are you listening?

God is calling; can you hear?