

**First United Methodist Church  
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“Seeking: Who Will You Listen To?”  
Texts: Genesis 2:15-17 & Matthew 4:1-11

The band U2 has been named as one of the most successful and influential groups of all time. Even though their sound is unique and has shifted dramatically since their early days in the late 1970s, the band has been influenced by the giants of rock, punk, blues, electronica, and country music, as well as traditional Irish music. This diverse array of sonic inspirations has shaped and changed U2’s music in significant ways over the years.

Lead singer Bono recounted a story about the recording of the song "Bullet the Blue Sky," which he says was directly inspired by the music of B.B. King. As the story goes, the band was struggling to come up with the right sound for the song when they heard a B.B. King record playing in the background. They stopped everything and listened, and then decided to try to capture that same gritty, bluesy sound in their own music. In my opinion, I think they got it just right.

Even though U2’s music is their own, they are influenced by what their members are listening to. Their music is a mosaic of influences, brought together at a particular moment in time. U2’s creativity doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Artists of all kinds are aware of the tendency to become like those you are surrounded by. It is human nature to mimic techniques and styles of the ones who train and collaborate with us. Musicians, artists, writers—creatives of all varieties—understand deeply that we become like those with whom we work. We often unconsciously take on the patterns of others and respond in similar ways. So, it seems that in art, as in life, who we listen to matters.

One of the lessons we teach to our children is about the company they keep. We monitor their friends and listen closely to the stories our kids tell. We ask about time spent with peers in the lunchroom and on the playground. We know that if they fall in with the “wrong crowd,” our kids are at greater risk for bullying and becoming bullies, having access to drugs and alcohol, and losing motivation for academics. As children become adolescents, their peer relationships become more valuable and influential, creating a greater need for caregiver reinforcement of positive peer groups. We don’t want to control our kids, but rather desire to create safe boundaries that will help them flourish.

Even in the midst of ideal conditions, sometimes our kids can go off the rails. They can make poor choices despite our best efforts to teach and encourage and love. In healthy homes, we find ways to repair and reconcile, welcoming our children back after mistakes with open-hearted forgiveness, while leading the path for change to occur.

Adam and Eve were present in the Garden of Eden, a place of blessedness and unity with God. Even in this ideal circumstance, the first humans encountered an influence that drew them away from God. This story from Genesis 2 and 3 is a familiar one. Eve is seduced by questions asked by a mysterious serpent. I don't know about you, but I would have likely been put off by the snake aspect of the situation. It appears Adam and Eve must have been used to engaging with creatures that would speak to them, seeing all of God's created ones as good and inoffensive. However, this passage calls to mind Lord Voldemort's snake Nagini from *Harry Potter*, who does the bidding of the evil one throughout that series.

No matter our pre-conceived notions of an encounter with a talking serpent, the meeting between Eve and the snake created a rift between humanity and God. Though the Garden was an oasis of unity, God created tasks and boundaries for the first humans. They were told to till and keep the Garden, and given all but one tree to eat from. Violating the boundaries had consequences—if they ate from the tree of knowledge, God told them they would die.

In the conversation between Eve and the serpent, I see shades of gossip and the kind of questioning that erodes confidence and trust. The serpent asks questions that make Eve doubt the One who has been nothing but faithful and true. Eve engages in exaggeration as she adds an additional provision about the tree that God never stated—that they would die even if they touched the fruit of the tree. The serpent offers a counter to God's claim, saying instead that they wouldn't die, and planting seeds of doubt about God's character, slyly arguing that God wants to keep the first humans from understanding the fullness of life.

There's something subtle happening here. I can see Eve operating in conversation like many of us do when we're trying to impress someone. She exaggerates and adds information. She responds to the serpent without an ounce of cynicism, innocently embracing all the seeds of doubt the creature wishes to plant. The Garden was supposed to be a safe place, but it turns out vigilance was needed there too.

The half-truths presented by the serpent are temptations for us all today. We all think we want unfettered freedom to make ourselves the arbiters of good and evil, choosing to place ourselves in God's role. Listen to the commentary written by Allen C. McSween, Jr in *Feasting on the Word*:

The serpent subtly insinuates that it is out of jealousy that God seeks to limit our freedom and forbid our enlightenment. Over against such tyranny, you owe it to yourself to resist. Think for yourself! Act for yourself! Do not let anyone, even God, define for you what is good and evil.”

The terms used here are familiar to the current cultural refrain that encourages us to “do your own research.” Our society is presently deconstructing the notion of expertise, citing the internet as a sufficient resource to help us understand the nuances of nearly every role or function in society. If we do our own research, we can be experts on vaccines, history, teaching, and more. We no longer trust those who've spent their lives learning and practicing in a content area to guide us in decision-making. It's as if we are all back in the Garden, hearing the serpent speaking words to our itching ears. We are aching to have freedom that looks like what we think is best for us alone.

The internet and technology built upon it are incredible tools, but these sources themselves can be suspect. As a result of artificial intelligence, we can ask a web-based tool like ChatGPT to generate full academic papers with complete citations without having to do the work. I used ChatGPT to generate information that helped me research concepts related to human psychology and the musical influences of U2 for today's sermon. It's faster and more in-depth than using a search engine for that kind of information. It's a brilliant tool, but like most things it has a dark side. Teachers and professors are now struggling to discriminate between their students' original writing and what was created by a machine. OpenAI, the creators of ChatGPT, have attempted to create tools to identify work created by ChatGPT, but there are questions of how effective that will be to address the problem of plagiarism.

Another technology uses artificial intelligence and machine learning to create deep fake videos, which alter existing video footage, replacing the original person or object with someone or something else. Our human brains have a difficult time discerning truth from lies in visual images. Though this technology can be used for entertainment or creative purposes, such as creating fictional scenarios involving celebrities or historical figures, these videos can also spread misinformation, manipulate public opinion, or even blackmail individuals. These examples are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of what advanced technology can do. Who or what can we trust when our reality starts to become shaky? What voices are worth listening to?

Jesus' story of contending with the devil in the wilderness strikes a stark contrast to the response of the first humans in the Garden. Rather than be swayed by the challenges of the devil to usurp power or act outside of God's role for him, Jesus responds with cynicism. He is wary of the devil's motives and timing. He is ready to respond to challenges with Scripture. The scene between Jesus and the devil reminds me of good and evil duking it out in a lightsaber battle, matching each other swing for swing, with the dark side eventually overcome by the light.

Jesus stood firm because he trusted God's boundaries. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus understood that the freedom God had given him was expansive but not boundless—that there were some actions he could take that would detract from his earthly mission. He knew his time contending in the wilderness was a part of a bigger story and the choices he made there would color the outcome of his ministry.

Jesus understood that none of us exists in a vacuum, and that freedom, as best understood, calls for the good of everyone. The kind of freedom that the serpent advocated was individualistic. The temptations of the devil were of a similar kind—serve yourself and show off. Our society has succumbed to the same temptations. All of us have.

The part of the Genesis story that we did not hear today was the full outcome of Adam and Eve's disobedience. When they violated the boundaries God set for them, God knew it. But God didn't strike them down or banish them immediately. As author Rachel Held Evans notes, God moved toward them in their vulnerability. God looked for them in the garden and through the curses seemed to seek to protect Adam and Eve and the world from the consequences of their decision.

Like Adam and Eve and Jesus, we are tempted to listen to voices that tell us we operate as individuals, that God's best isn't enough, that God doesn't understand. Sometimes we

successfully defend against these and many other temptations, but other times we fail. Lent is a time when we can take a step back, remove some clutter, and look honestly at ourselves. Jesus' struggle with the devil in the wilderness invites us to contend with the dark places in our lives, so that we might come face to face with our fears, insecurities, and hurts so we can name them, understand them, repent from them, and overcome them.

Though Jesus withstood the devil's tests, he didn't come away unscathed. Matthew tells us that the angels came and waited on him after the trial. The Son of God needed comfort in the wilderness—an opportunity for healing and to experience a sense of protection.

Even if we resist the cultural lies to live individualistically, we also retain scars. If we go into battle for the things that matter, we will likely come out bruised and require some time of healing to get back into the fray. But our scars may be the most beautiful parts of us, bearing witness to all we've seen and withstood. In Amanda Gorman's poem "Lucent," she penned these words:

“Glossy scabs, tight-raised skin,  
These can look silver in certain moonlights.  
In other words,  
Our scars are the brightest  
Parts of us.”

Our scars are proof that we lean into those things we care about, willing to put our whole selves on the line.

So this Lent, I invite you into a season of questioning what and who you listen to, testing and holding those views up to the light of God's hope for humanity. Ask God the tough questions. Repent of your brokenness. And be prepared to rejoice with your bright and silvery scars in the light of Easter morning. Amen.