

The First Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2017
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

I saw a turkey vulture the other day.

I confess it made a little giddy ... so much so that I pulled to the side of the road and stopped the car, just to text the good news home to Barb.

You see, we've been on the lookout for their return; for us, here in central Oregon, turkey vultures are the first sign of spring. (In the Rogue Valley, by the way, they're supposed to return on February 14th, making them almost romantic to behold.)

When I was growing up, we used to say that robins returned in the spring. They migrated south for the winter and returned to announce springtime's return. I don't know if robins still migrate in Michigan, but I've learned that they don't everywhere. When we lived outside of Chicago, the robins were year-round companions, but we did learn to watch – and listen – for the return of the red-winged blackbirds. They filled the meteorological niche there, an avian almanac that encouraged us to declare winter's end and the promise of warmer weather.

With all that name-dropping, you might think I think myself an expert on birds. I assure you I'm not. And I know it. I'm married to someone who regularly reminds me, after all, of my ornithological deficiencies. Barb's taught me to watch out for the turkey vultures, almost in spite of myself. And she tries to teach me other lessons, as well, but I don't keep up with her.

Taking a hike with her can be humbling. Sometimes, I've asked her which bird makes the sound I just heard and she'll tell me it was a squirrel. As we go along, she'll stop and look up. And she might ask if I see or hear the bird she's picked out from the backdrop of sights and sounds. It's common that I'll have to say that, in fact, I do NOT see what she sees or hear what she hears. I cannot track the nuances she finds fascinating and diagnostic.

I'm left to conclude that a birdwatcher hears the same things the rest of us hear and sees the same things there are to see, but over time, a birdwatcher moves past the "that's some kind of bird" stage to the point where certain trills and whistles sort themselves out – and certain slight differences in shapes and coloring become significant. I'm rather in awe of the ability of people who know how to recognize more in the ordinary, everyday environment than others do.

I think something like that is the reason Jesus went out into the wilderness for 40 days. Every year, on the First Sunday of Lent, we hear the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness. What's not necessarily obvious is that Jesus heads out there immediately after his baptism. Matthew described that baptism this way:

... just as [Jesus] came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."
(Matthew 3:16-17)

That same Spirit who descended upon Jesus at his baptism led him into the wilderness. Barbara Brown Taylor says Jesus was still "dripping wet" when he went there; he didn't even go home to change into something dry!

Both Matthew and Luke go into some detail about the specifics of the temptations that faced him there, but I notice that in Matthew's version at least, it looks like the tempter only shows up after Jesus had been out there, fasting, for forty days and forty nights. Forty days is the biblical way of saying that it was a long, long time that Jesus wandered out there, all alone.

So here's the thing. If Matthew's right ... if Jesus spent all that time all alone, without even the devil there to keep him company ... what was he doing all that long time? The Bible doesn't tell us, but I wonder if maybe he was, at least in part, listening ... listening for birds and listening to the wind. Surely he was listening for the voice of God to speak a word to him about where his life would go next. I rather imagine that Jesus went out into the wilderness and listened for echoes ... echoes, echoes, echoes ... of that voice, and for what else God might *whisper* next.

It can be hard to hear the still soft voice amidst the distractions of everyday life, so maybe Jesus needed that time in the wilderness to listen carefully, to learn how to hear the distinctive notes in the call of God. And maybe it's because he worked so hard to listen for that voice from God that, when the temptations come, as they do in the end, he was ready. He could sort out the voices because he'd been working at the hard work of listening. He could tell the shrill, false voice of the devil who would have him trade in his God-given identity as God's beloved from the reassuring voice that encouraged him to stay true to himself.

That's the exact opposite of the story we hear from Genesis this morning. The serpent in that story undermines the relationship between God and God's beloved children, Eve and Adam. They let themselves become distracted and listen to another voice, one that tells them that there's something more they should long for, grasp at. They listen to that voice and forget who they are and *whose* they are.

There's a digression I have to make. For centuries, this has been a problematic story for us, suffering from a case of "men reading badly." So we should be clear that it's not just Eve, of course. Adam's there, all the time; he just can't seem to come up with anything to say. And in the end, he points a finger at her accusingly. And men have been doing the same ever since. And for what it's worth, St. Paul, in our reading from Romans this morning, never singles out Eve; for better and for worse, he speaks only of "the transgression of Adam." That's the stark contrast for Paul: one man's disobedience versus Jesus' obedience. The etymology, by the way, of that word – obedience – is telling. It comes from a French word, meaning to "to listen." ⁱ

All of which brings us back to our 40 days of Lent. They really are a gift for us, an invitation to us to follow that example of Jesus, to train ourselves to listen for the voice of God, to practice listening for that voice that tells us that we are – each of us and all of us – children of God ... loved by God ... precious to God. Because for those not trained to listen, other voices will distract. They may tell us we need to try harder than we do, be better than we are ... IF we would earn God's love and favor. But those are a false voices.

And so we have Jesus as our example. That must surely be part of the reason we always hear the account of Jesus in the wilderness this first Sunday in Lent.

It could be humbling for us – or even humiliating; the example of Jesus in the wilderness could be nothing more than a reminder merely of how meager our faith is in comparison. But I think the intent, rather, is for us to be encouraged to follow his example, to learn how to become a God-watcher, one who looks for God and who listens for the song of the Spirit.

I have reasons to be encouraged.

As I've allowed, Barb has humbled me on many an occasion on our hikes in the forests. I do not hear all that she does. I do not see everything that catches her eye.

But she has also encouraged me, as well. And because of the time we've spent, I've begun to sort a few things out. I can actually identify the song of the Mountain Chickadee, and to hear the distinctive song they sing this time of year, when courting. I can identify some of the little birds ahead of us on the trail as juncos, identified by the white outer tail coverts that flash as they flit ahead of us. And I have learned to tell a turkey vulture in flight, even at some distance, by the distinctive dihedral shape of their wings while gliding – and they glide so very well.

And if I can train my ear and my eye to hear and see some of what is out there for me to behold in nature, then maybe there is still hope that I can learn more. And maybe there is hope for all of us, that we can learn to pick out the distinctive markings of God on our world, to hear the distinctive song of the Spirit that calls out to us by name and claims us as God's beloved.

ⁱ According to <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=obey>:

From Old French *obeir* "obey, be obedient, do one's duty" (12c.), from Latin *obedire, oboedire* "obey, be subject, serve; pay attention to, give ear," literally "listen to," from *ob* "to" + *audire* "listen, hear"