

Emma Nord

May 12, 2024

7th Sunday of Easter

### **Listening Together**

I never understood the stories in the Bible about the casting of lots. I mean, you're gonna leave some important decision to the toss of the dice? That doesn't make sense.

Then I started playing Dungeons & Dragons.

Suddenly, the randomness of the dice toss became a perfectly acceptable method of decision making, within and, on occasion, outside of the game. In one memorable moment last December, my parents and I were debating whether or not to get a Christmas tree. Unable to find a coin to flip, I reached for my D&D dice. However, I guess I still had coins on the mind, for as I held up a die and prepared to roll it, I said "Evens we get a tree, tails we don't."

I'm never gonna live that one down. (For those of you deeply invested in Nord family Christmas affairs, I did not, in fact, roll a tails. The die came up on a two, and we did indeed get a tree.)

Dungeons, dragons, and Christmas decorations aside, I believe this practice of casting lots raises a crucial question. How does God talk to us, and how do we listen?

[beat]

In our Acts passage this morning, Jesus' disciples find themselves facing his unexpected absence for the second time. They seek divine guidance through the casting of lots. This was a traditional method of determining God's will used in Ancient Israel up through the time of the New Testament. We know very little about the objects or procedures used in this tradition, though this practice may be tied to the Urim and Thummin, described in the Pentateuch as divination objects of the high priest. Yet this method of listening for God seems limited. Even if God's will is revealed in the outcome, we are still greatly restricting God. Can God only communicate when we choose to set up the ritual on our end? And what if we don't give God the right multiple choice options? There are so many ways we can get this wrong. [beat]

In our story in Acts, the way the disciples consult God through the casting of lots is greatly impacted by their assumptions about God, Jesus, and salvation. They—like

us—haven't quite figured out yet what this Messiah business is all about. They know the Messiah has come in Jesus, but they are bound by their cultural and historical context in imagining what exactly that might mean. They are expecting the Messiah to deliver Israel from Rome. Earlier in Acts 1, in verses 7 and 8, they have this exchange with Jesus just before the Ascension:

“ ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’

He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ ”

[beat]

Then Jesus ascends, they return to Jerusalem, and, as we read this morning, Peter decides that a 12th disciple should be chosen to replace Judas, quoting Psalm 109, “Let another take his position as overseer.” Our lectionary passage this morning cut out this reference, along with several verses detailing the gory death of Judas. Peter doesn't explain or examine why there ought to be exactly 12 witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. It's taken for granted that, since the Messiah will deliver the 12 tribes of Israel, 12 is a proper number of apostles.

For all the time they've spent learning from Jesus, they still can't imagine a salvation that extends beyond the 12 tribes of Israel. This assumption—which is at the core of their social, religious, and cultural identity—shapes both the questions they ask and the interpretation of the responses. This has a profound impact on the ways they speak to and listen for God.

[beat]

How do we listen for God? How do our assumptions of how God works, of who's in and who's out, affect the questions we ask and the responses we interpret?

[beat]

This morning's Psalm describes listening for God's word through the Law. For the psalmist, that meant the Torah, or the pentateuch. For Christians in 2024, perhaps we can reasonably extend the term to the whole of the Bible in this particular context. Although this passage doesn't offer much of a how-to on reading and interpreting scripture, we are promised that this endeavor will be rewarding. Those who delight in

the law—the word— of God and meditate upon it day and night are happy—or blessed, perhaps—and righteous. The Lord watches over the paths of the congregation of the righteous. They are held in contrast with the wicked, sinners, and scoffers, who will not last. These blessed ones are like trees which thrive and bear good fruit.

[beat]

How do we listen for God in scripture? What are the fruits in our lives of our reading, interpretation, and response?

[beat]

Our passage from First John offers yet another perspective on listening to God. John writes that “Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony [of God] in their hearts. ... And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.” What is this connection between this testimony—God’s word in our hearts—and eternal life?

In Luke 10, an expert of the law asks Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds by asking what the law says, and the expert answers that the law says to love God and and love your neighbor. Jesus affirms this answer as correct, telling him “Do this, and you will live.” But the man asks, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a priest and a Levite both neglect to take care of a man who has been beaten by robbers, but a Samaritan takes care of the man, brings him to an inn, and pays for his treatment. The Samaritan was a neighbor to the man who had been robbed, and we are to go and do likewise.

[beat]

This expert in the law is doing his best to listen to God, and it seems like he’s doing a pretty good job. He knows his stuff, he asks good questions, and he has the right answers for the questions Jesus asks him. Yet Jesus doesn’t say, “believe in me and you will live” or “study the scriptures and you will live.” We must love the Lord with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and all our mind and love our neighbor as ourself, and we will live. As the good Samaritan demonstrates, it is the embodiment of this love which leads us to eternal life.

[beat]

How do we listen for God? How do we tangibly embody that listening?

[beat]

The good Samaritan's ministry to the injured man was one of presence and relationship, in spite of the worldly rules and systems which should have driven the two apart. This embodiment of love forges a deep, radical connection. We see this connectedness in Jesus' prayer in our gospel passage this morning.

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

I believe that Jesus' prayer for the disciples is also a prayer for us, here and now. What would that community, that oneness, look like for us today: in our families, in St. Paul's, in Greenville, in the US, in the world? How does our context in each of those spaces affect the ways we connect with one another and with God?

[beat]

I had the absolute privilege of living and studying in South Africa for 3 months last year through my university's intercultural program. We studied colonization, theology, the rise and fall of apartheid, reconciliation, South African history and culture, our own assumptions and biases, and just about everything in between as we traveled around the country and met many wonderful people. One of the first lessons we learned from our hosts in Johannesburg was that of ubuntu. Ubuntu is a Zulu word with no direct translation to English. It is a combination of the word for person, umuntu, and the word for people, abantu. In ubuntu, the individual and the community are inextricably linked. Your humanity—our humanity—is my humanity. Your joy is my joy. Your pain is my pain. Often, ubuntu is summarized as "I am because you are."

Now if this was theology class, we would talk about all the ways that our views of being human shape how we understand sin and evil, which in turn shapes how we understand salvation, which shapes how we see Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit, which shapes how we view the church, which shapes how we think about being human. That's a very fun conversation, but perhaps now's not the time.

What I will say this morning is that context matters. Our own biases, assumptions, and hopes, our social and historical and political and economic context, deeply impact the ways we view God, the world, each other, and ourselves. Just like the disciples in Acts and the expert of the law in Luke, our context shapes how we listen to God and how we interpret what we hear.

How does this relate to ubuntu? We need community. We need one another to help us understand our assumptions, our biases, our context. A community has wisdom beyond the sum of its parts, for we learn from and with each other. We will never be fully unbiased or free from our context, but in strong, diverse communities, we gain new perspectives on ourselves, each other, the world, and God.

[beat]

How do we listen to God in community?

[beat]

One of the highlights of my time in South Africa was a week we spent along the shore in the Western Cape. We stayed with host families in Zwelihle, a black township near the white town of Hermanus, and we spent the week with a group of young adults from Zwelihle, many of them leaders and advocates in their community. Together, we embarked on a Contextual Bible Study. The Contextual Bible Study is a practice of looking at the world behind the Word in order to understand more deeply and make connections to the Word our own world today. The practice was developed within the excellent theology program at the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa.

We spent about 3 days on Jesus' triumphal entry and cleansing of the temple in Matthew 21. We studied the themes of peace and violence in this text as we examined the historical, social, political, economic, and religious context of the characters and settings within the text as well as our own historical, social, political, economic, and religious context. We considered our own communities and the ways in which we saw violence and peace within them. We pondered together what Jesus' good news might mean for us in our own context. We listened for God by listening to one another.

[beat]

Jesus taught the expert in the law that eternal life—which is God's testimony—is not about knowing or believing the right thing, not about following the right rules of purity and holiness. It is in caring for one another, in acknowledging and honoring that our humanity is intertwined, in committing to journey with one another through the joy and pain of living.

As we anticipate and welcome the coming of the Holy Spirit, what does it look like for St. Paul's to care for and journey with one another as we embody our listening for God?