

## ***Who Will You Listen To?***

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

One commentary says this of today's Genesis story:

"God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened," the serpent says. And while the serpent didn't lie—indeed, their eyes did open... It was the death of their innocence... Before we can embark on a life of wisdom—one that requires us to choose, over and over again, between using our words and actions as poison or medicine—we must allow our naive innocence to die."<sup>1</sup>

Is it time for us to let go of a desire to go back to Eden? We are not perfect – not even close – after all. Some Christian traditions might try to convince us otherwise. Perfection is not all it's cracked up to be – as they say. I think you get it. It is probably people like me who need this sermon. Setting ourselves up on insincere pedestals sets us up for a big fall. We are human, fallible, and buffeted by the din of myriad voices demanding our attention. So, then, it is a relevant question to ask of ourselves – Who will you and I listen to?

Ethicist Emilie Townes spoke on a podcast about, for her, the importance of doing theology as a community. By doing theology, I mean how we understand the Bible. Townes says that if we take Scripture seriously, then we wrestle with it *within community* rather comfortably at home, by ourselves, where we cherry-pick the passages that suit our needs or convenience. That is risky stuff, though – wrestling with the Bible and faith, in community. I think that this is something we can set as a goal this year, connecting more as "community" at St. Andrew's to make sense of what God might be telling us today.

What are the implications of that for us? I'm not sure, *but it makes me nervous*. It means that we to reconnect as community – whether on zoom or in person – grappling with the Bible, listening to one another's stories; having faith that in the cacophony of voices, and perhaps within the conflict between opinions, we trust that God's voice will emerge. Without active and intentional discernment of God's vision, as theologian Karl Barth said – "with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other" – then our faith becomes a projection of our personal desires.

Townes also spoke of choosing Hope. She was writing a book about black health in the United States, and the picture she got was dismal. She shared this with her friend, liberation theologian James Cone and his response to her was:

*Emilie, you must have hope, you've got to have hope because if you don't, the only alternative is despair and then they've won.*<sup>2</sup>

Being conscious of the voice or voices that you and I are listening to; that is an essential consideration as we try to be modern day disciples following the teaches of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> commentary on Matthew 4:1-11 & Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 by Rev. Danielle Shroyer. SanctifiedArt.org

<sup>2</sup> <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/episode-228-emilie-townes-the-wisdom-of-hope-reissue/> Interview with womanist ethicist Emilie Townes on Podcast "The Bible for Normal People" (hosted by Pete Enns & Jared Byas)

Daring to ask questions, even painful questions, within community. Trusting that God can handle our doubts, our anger, our fear.

What do you think? Do you “wrestle” with the Bible and your personal faith perspective? Could there be merit to what Emilie Townes stridently proposes, here: That we need to be wary of understanding faith in isolation – whether we are discerning our call as individual Christians, or, collectively as church?

We have known, perhaps still know, “isolation”. Living through this pandemic, it is important to isolate at times. But, we are beginning to connect again – thank the Lord!

Today, as we begin this journey of Lent, through the horrors of Good Friday death and into the exuberant joy of Easter, I think that we are, here, challenged as a community of faith to come together more. Mind you, we still need to be careful, to be aware of those among us, I’m one, who are anxious about physically being in spaces with others. Some of us will join community by video, some in person, some wearing masks, some not.

This Lent we will listen to voices that challenge us, inspire us. Next week we will hear about an outreach project in Sudbury Secondary School called “The Value Vault”. Imagine for a moment that challenge faced by too many teenagers in Sudbury who don’t have a stable family life, perhaps even finding themselves homeless at times. How can they learn?

Like the din of voices sounding a note of despair, thinking about addictions, homelessness, healthcare. We could feel despair when we imagine – hard as it to! – a teen facing conflict at home and finding themselves uncertain where they will sleep. May our ears be attuned next week to a voice that inspires hope in us. Hope that invites us to partner, to support, but also to dispel our myths about vulnerable teens.

We do not live in Eden, nor do I think we aspire to that. In this real world, we are barraged with voices, many of them tempting us to buy into superficial values. Let us take some notes from Dr. Emilie Townes today. Let us intentionally create communities as we ponder God’s call to St. Andrew’s, to live out our collective faith in our challenging context, downtown Sudbury.

Let us intentionally listen to the voice of hope when we are tempted to despair and the paralysis that results. May we let hope direct us as we speak and act for justice, unconditional love, and reconciliation. Amen.