

Sunday, April 12, 2026
The Second Sunday Of Easter

Festal Evensong
4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz

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Scripture: Listening to God

Part of our 2026 Lenten Sermon Series on The Five Habits of Christian Life.

I

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Over the season past of Lent, we have been reflecting on what we have called the Five Habits of the Christian Life. My clergy colleagues have spoken of prayer, of the Eucharist, of confession and spiritual direction, and of the care of the poor. And in each of these, we have returned to a simple and searching truth: that the Christian life is not first about what we achieve, but about how we learn to dwell with God, how we patiently become people who recognize God, receive God, and remain with God, so that it might be on earth as it is in heaven.

And so tonight, we come to Scripture.

Which may seem the most familiar of all. For many of us, Scripture is something we have heard often. Its language is not strange to us who worship here. Its stories have shaped the imagination of our faith, perhaps from a very early age.

On the other hand, some may feel that this book, really a library, is so intimidating that approaching it is a lost cause, you already feel behind. But whether the Bible is an old friend or a longtime stranger, let us not be anxious. God is the one who makes all things new.

But please know any familiarity we may claim can be deceptive. Because it is entirely possible to be close to Scripture, to read it regularly, even to love it deeply, and still not quite know how to listen.

The question before us tonight is not simply what Scripture is, or even what it says. But this: What does it mean to listen when God speaks?

II

We don't come to Scripture as blank slates. We come already formed, shaped by our hometowns, our schools, the shows we've watched, our families, that have taught us what the Bible is and how it speaks.

I grew up in what Flannery O'Connor called the "Christ-haunted South." It was a world where the language of God was never far away. Scripture was quoted easily, often with great confidence. It appeared in conversation, in classrooms, in public and political life. Church membership was assumed.

And yet it is possible to be surrounded by Scripture and still not be taught how to listen.

In that world, Scripture was often used with a certain immediacy. Questions were settled quickly. Verses became conclusions. And the tone could grow sharp, even aggressive, like a border collie barking at the edges of the sheepfold.

I do not say this to dismiss what was good and sincere in that formation. There was real devotion there, a genuine desire to be faithful.

But something was missing in that Southern zeitgeist. Scripture was not often approached as a place of patience or silence. It became something we *used* to keep everything in line. A toolbox rather than a portal to new worlds of faithfulness.

III

Was it a place where God spoke? Or was it a way by which we spoke with conviction and certainty to banish doubt and difference, a way of settling questions quickly, of establishing what is right and what is wrong, who stood with us and who stood against us.

In that milieu, it becomes very easy to mistake confidence andchutzpah for faithfulness.

Our Lord Himself names this danger well in John's Gospel: *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life."*

It's a bold warning. Because Jesus tells us that it is possible to search the Holy Scriptures diligently and reverently, and yet still fail to hear what they are saying. You can know the text backwards and forwards, and yet miss the One to whom it points, and the One around which they orbit.

There have been times, including in the South in which I was formed, when Scripture has been used to defend and support horrible things: exclusion, slavery, genocide, leaders who act with impunity, even to justify divisions that break apart wound the body of Christ. And these verses lifted quickly, applied decisively, made to bear a weight they were never meant to carry.

Again, the problem is not Scripture. The problem is what happens when Scripture is placed in *our* service. When we no longer stand before it expecting to be addressed, corrected, changed, but instead approach it already knowing what it must say.

At that point, however sincerely, we are no longer listening *through* Scripture for the voice of God. We are speaking over it, all to keep us on that straight and narrow path, which is really, in the end, our culture, not God's Kingdom.

IV

If this danger is real, I'm not suggesting we abandon Scripture. We need to learn to receive it again. Not control it. Be given it. Not wield it to secure our ground, but stand on the ground where someone else speaks first.

Because Scripture, at its heart, doesn't hand us an idea or a system or a set of conclusions that tie everything up in a bow. It points to a person. Jesus Christ. And, goodness, Jesus knows how to unravel us just as much as he knows how to love us.

And His work not just one theme among others. He's the one the many voices finally gather around in culmination. Without him, Scripture can turn harsh, fragmented, twisted and forced to say things that don't show forth the God we've come to know in Christ. With Jesus, things start to focus. We learn how to listen.

Luke shows this process on the Easter road to Emmaus. The disciples walk with the risen Christ and don't recognize him. And as they walk, he opens the Scriptures, not by giving quick answers, but by showing how everything written finds its meaning in him.

Only then do their hearts start to burn.

It's not their familiarity that wakes them up. It's meeting him. Breaking bread with him.

At the center of that meeting is his life, death and the life that bursts forth out of death. God's love given away, not in domination but in surrender, vindicated in resurrection. As Paul puts it: we preach Christ crucified.

That's the light to read Scripture by. Which means: whenever Scripture sounds like something else—harsh, defensive, clenched—we're invited to listen again. Patiently. Until what we hear starts to sound like the voice of the One who gives himself for the life of the world, even in the valley of the shadow of death, and lives.

V

If Scripture is indeed a place where we are met in this way, where Christ Himself addresses us through what is written, then the question becomes not only *how* we understand it, but *how we place ourselves before it*. This is not first a matter of technique, but of posture.

We are not simply asked to read Scripture. We are asked to learn, gradually, how to listen.

That listening is not immediate. It is formed in us, patiently, as we return again and again, allowing the words to work upon us rather than rushing to work upon them.

We see something of this in the calling of Samuel. When the voice of God first comes to him, he does not recognize it. He must be taught how to hear. And when at last he understands, his response is simple: *"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."*

This is how we begin, not by knowing it all, but by being available to what is next and, potentially very new.

This is why, in the life of the Church, Scripture is not given to us in isolation. It is set within the rhythm of prayer, the ordering of the liturgy, the setting of our music, the steady pattern of the lectionary, a reading plan that is shared all over the world on Sunday mornings. We hear it together, over time, in a safe and beautiful place, so that our hearing may be shaped and deepened.

We are not left to construct meaning for ourselves. We are drawn into a long and patient listening, we enter into conversation together, Scripture sets the rhythm of our year, and the context is Christ's full presence in the bread and wine upon our altar and table, and then in our bodies.

And as we begin to listen in this way and in this context, we find that Scripture does not simply confirm us. It addresses us. It unsettles us. It calls us beyond ourselves, our culture, the story we tell ourselves, into the life made known in the risen Christ.

VI

If we are to learn to listen in this way, we must also be given something like a test. Because not every voice that claims the authority of Scripture is, in fact, the voice of Christ.

But how can we possibly judge this?

A short answer, though not an easy one, is this: We listen for what sounds like *Jesus*. We listen for the voice made known in Jesus Christ, most fully in His self-giving on the Cross and the full life that follows with his Holy Spirit.

As Saint Paul reminds us in the Epistle to the Philippians, Christ “*emptied himself*,” taking the form of a servant, humbling himself even to the point of death. This is the pattern. This is the sound of His voice.

And so, when Scripture is heard in a way that leads to pride, or domination, or the closing off of others, we should pause for a good moment. Not to reject Scripture, but to listen again. Because it may be that we have learned to hear something other than Christ in our reading of it.

The task of the Christian life is not simply to repeat what we have been taught, but to be conformed, more and more, to the living One who speaks, and who is risen.

VII

I remember, years ago, sitting in a classroom. It was not a church, not a place where one expected a theological argument, and yet the conversation turned to Scripture. I was told, quite directly, that the church I had grown up in, the Episcopal Church, was not truly Christian. That we were not, as it was put, “Bible-believing.”

And the verse came quickly: “*All Scripture is inspired by God.*” As if that settled the matter.

I remember feeling two things at once: fear, and confusion. Fear, because if that were true, then I was quite lost. And confusion, because I did not know how to respond, because I thought I was on the right track, frankly. I did not yet have the language or the clarity to articulate why. So I did what many of us do in such moments. I went quiet.

It took time. Reading, listening, struggling to understand what was being claimed, and what I had been given.

But slowly, something became clear. The center of the Christian faith is not a book. It is a person. And that person is Jesus Christ.

Scripture does not ask to be believed *in*, as though it were itself the object of faith. It asks to be heard and cherished, because it bears witness to *God with us*.

And the place where that is unmistakable for me was in Christ’s own words: “*There is no greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*”

If I could return to that moment, I would not argue. I would simply say: I believe in Jesus Christ. And I am still learning how to hear His voice in the Scriptures. If you are still on the fence, I hope you will join me and this parish community in listening for the voice of the One who was crucified, and who lives, and who still speaks.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
