

## Discerning Voices

*Luke 21: 5-19*

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down. They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”<sup>s</sup> And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them. “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues, and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

On Netflix is a show called *Cobra Kai*. It’s a spin-off of the Karate Kid from 30 plus years ago. Remember Mr. Miyagi’s “wax on, wax off.” Remember the blond kid, Johnny, whose used karate to bully classmates and whose sensei who taught him “no mercy.” Remember the crane kick with Daniel-son hobbling on one leg. Now the kids are all grown up and the blond kid, Johnny, has started his own dojo. Same name: Cobra Kai. Same motto: no mercy. And wouldn’t you know the same mindset. Except, most of his students are those who are bullied at school themselves. And as the plot unfolds, we watch as these students begin to adopt their teacher’s mindset as they start to become bullies themselves. The apple never falls far from the tree. The first humans in the garden are in a similar situation: with a tree and a serpent and a decision about whose voice and desires they are going to absorb?

Start by noticing that the scene in the garden isn’t about moralism, it’s a story about who we are and how we got into the hot mess we often find ourselves in. You see, we are anthropological creatures who are born into a world full of social constructs and histories. White supremacy, patriarchy, nationalism, and religion all predate us. We are born into it, and part of our human development is that we imitate those constructs around us. Ever since we were babies, we observed behaviors and personalities. We absorbed language and values and beliefs. Ever stick out your tongue to a baby? What does she do? She sticks her tongue out at us! When we were in elementary school we absorbed the ideologies of our parents and then when we got into middle school we assimilated toward the ideologies of our friends. We had teachers and older generations who became role models for us to mimic. Once heard a troubling statistic: Did you know that more than 60% of children who witness—and are not victims of—domestic violence in their household end up grow up and finding themselves in a domestically violent situation? We absorb the behaviors of others, whether they be peaceful or destructive. Life giving or life-draining. We are anthropological creatures who imitate and borrow the desire of whatever environment we find ourselves in.

In the garden there is a conflict of desire within the first humans. They are told they can have just about anything they want except for one tree. God says don't eat from that one tree, which is a bit suggestive, isn't it? Just like how we tell our children not to stick their fingers in an electric socket. They look at us like, "You mean you can stick your fingers in an electric socket?" Maybe the first humans had no desire to eat off that tree until it was suggested to them that they couldn't. So the serpent shows up and exploits their desire. Calls God a liar—and says God is a dictator who doesn't want them to know what God knows. So the first humans say, "why not!" as they listen to the wrong voice. And we know what happens: absolute dysfunction in the connections between them and God, them blaming one other, them feeling shame for not "wearing shoes"...all because they listened to the desire of the wrong voice.

Now hold onto the story as we fast forward to Jesus' time. The disciples walk out of the temple and see how desirable it is—same word used to describe the tree in the garden. Jesus says the time is coming when the temple will turn to dust. And when it does there will be voices claiming to be Christ himself, who will summon us to follow them. Some may preach righteous indignation or insurrection or nationalism. Some may say God allowed the destruction and blame one group's behaviors or another. "Do not imitate them" Jesus says. There will be violence, creation will act dysfunctional, there will be plagues and hunger, leaders will rise who claim retribution is the only way forward. "Do not listen to the voice who will lead you astray."

Well, it kind of sounds like Jesus is talking about our time, doesn't it. Insurrections and plagues, wars and creation acting chaotic. Makes me want to grab my "The End is Near" sign and stand on a street corner somewhere! Of course, here's the thing: Jesus is talking about our time. But he's also talking about every other time in human history as well. Where there is discord which leads to division and violence against our neighbors. Where nations wage war over power and produce. Where we vote in voices who promise quick fixes to complicated problems. It's all in the genesis of our story. So you see, Jesus predicting these things is rather low hanging fruit, because it is how things have always been—repeating a history of societal disfunction and discord—which goes all the way back to our first parents in the garden.

So do you hear what Jesus is asking us to do? While everything is unraveling before our eyes, he tells us to not be afraid—to break the cycle which leads us astray. Now, it's not as if we honestly aren't going to be afraid—even Jesus is afraid in the garden when he says, "Not my desire, but yours." What he is asking us to do is to not imitate the desires of those who are afraid. That when the haters come, and they do, we are to respond in a way which does not mimic them. Instead, we are to act with wisdom and faith. And to show them a different way. Jesus, before he heads to the cross, asks his disciples to follow him in a way that breaks the cycle and imitates the love and compassion and forgiveness of God. And while we know it isn't the easiest way to live, perhaps deep down, we know it is the most meaningful way to live.

So do not fear. We didn't start the fire. It predates us. But so does the love and peace and justice of God—which we are also born into. So Trinity: keep imitating the desire of a God who loves and embraces all. And maybe, just maybe in the process someone else is watching, and then we become an example of what it means to choose a better way together. Amen.