One of the most popular shows on the streaming service Netflix during these Covid days has been the *The Tiger King*. If you haven’t seen it or heard about it, it’s a documentary that tells the story of some of the most notorious breeders of tigers and other big cats in the United States. It centers on the saga of Joe Exotic, the self-described Tiger King, whose own struggles lead him down a path of ruin and unabated abuse of the humans and animals around him. At the end of the series, Joe Exotic finds himself in prison, serving time for attempted murder and animal abuse.

It’s not a show I would watch with my children because of the violence and vulgar language, but in quiet moments these last few weeks, when I needed a break from my own reality, I would sneak away and join the millions of other viewers in losing ourselves in this outrageous tale.

I’m done watching it now, but two things have stayed with me from the series. The first is the disturbing statistic that there are more tigers in captivity in the United States than can be found living in the wild. The second is the image of Joe Schreibvogel, before he declares himself Joe Exotic telling a news team that what he most wants to do with his zoo is to create a place to rescue big cats who have been bred in captivity.

In that early footage he sounds disgusted by the idea of breeding big cats for sale and life in captivity, an industry of which he would later declare himself King. That footage has stuck with me, longer than any of the other incredible tiger-laden images from that series. It captured my attention I think because it challenged me to remember that we are all capable of profound change for both good and ill and that it matters greatly what messages we listen to.

I think “the thief,” Jesus speaks of who comes “to steal, kill, and destroy” is very real, regardless of whether we understand that thief as the whisper of insecurity and the lure of power or if we understand it as evil itself. We might like to believe that we are different or that there is something good in us that keeps us from completely losing our way, but what this series reminded me was how capable we all are of falling victim to our own most
troublesome tendencies. That doesn’t make us bad. I think it just makes us human, capable of great good and great evil, and dependent on our connection to the good, the healthy, and the holy for our salvation on every level.

I’m not someone who thinks we can or need to cultivate a kind of purity. In fact, I think that can become a kind of dangerous idolatry all its own. Rather, I hear teachings like the ones we read from Jesus today calling us to strengthen our connection to him and all that saves our lives physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

These Covid days, I have found this a very helpful reminder. It has been helpful to remind myself that ideas about the future are only ideas. It has been helpful to remind myself that despite all that troubles me, there is still much I can be grateful for. It has been helpful to remember and to strengthen my awareness of my connection to the Holy, to other human beings, and to the Earth.

I have found it a rewarding season to pay very careful attention to the changes of the Earth. The tulips in my front yard bloomed this week. They opened their colorful faces to the rising sun and burst open all at once. My boys and I danced around them with glee, plunging our noses into their cups like overgrown honey bees, trying to see if the ones with different colors smelled differently.

Then it rained for two days straight, and I noticed that the tulips had closed. They were still colorful but it looked like they were resting, taking time to soak up the nourishing spring rain with their roots, and waiting patiently for the sun to come out when the rain had passed.

It made me think about Jesus calling his sheep by name. The sheep know the shepherd’s voice. The sheep follow when their names are called. I thought, I want to be more like the sheep. I want to be more like the tulips. I want to learn how to listen well to the voice of the shepherd who will not lead me astray but who wants me to have “life abundantly.” I want to learn better how to wait out the rainy days and open my arms wide in joyful prayer on the days full of sun.

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I think it can be hard to tell which messages are coming from the shepherd and which ones from the thief.
Jesus offers helpful hints here, which I have already mentioned. The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. The shepherd wants us to have life and have it abundantly.

But I think it is not always clear what’s what. I think learning to listen well to the difference is the worthwhile, humble work of a lifetime--perhaps never fully complete on this side of the veil. I think learning to listen well to other human beings, to the earth, and to God is a craft and an art. I think it is not too different from the work that musicians do when tuning their instruments. I think it is not too different from the work a metal detector or a water seeker does moving their divining tools across the ground. I think maybe it is not too different from the sculptor who trusts that the figure they intend to sculpt is already in the rock and their job is to listen well enough to set it free.

I (think) spiritual lives will all look a bit different from each other. But I think learning to listen well is one thing we will have in common. There are lots of ways to talk about it: that work of listening. I like the way Kermit the Frog says it in *The Rainbow Connection.* Through the wonders of the internet this week I was able to hear Paul Williams talk about writing the words to that song. He talked about it as a song that pays homage to the Source of all Creativity, whose voice we can all learn to listen for. Or, as Kermit sings,

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I've heard it too many times to ignore it.
It's something that I'm supposed to be.
Someday we'll find it
The rainbow connection.
The lovers, the dreamers and me.
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I’m still learning how to listen but that’s what I hear when I hear Jesus talking about himself as the gate or the door as it’s more literally translated. He’s the door we’re all looking for. We’re all listening for that connection he’s calling us toward. It’s the connection that will save our lives and our souls. It’s the connection that will offer us wholeness, well-being, peace, and transformation into all we’re made to be.

My whole life long, I hope to continue learning how to listen for that voice, to walk through the door of that love and into all the transforming connection on the other side. Maybe you’ll join me. Maybe these are good days to practice listening well. May it be so. Amen.