

Welcome

Thanks to the pandemic, the first Marvel TV show turned out to be the weird, wonderful *WandaVision*. If you're not a Marvel fan, let's do a quick summary.

The show picks up after the events of *Avengers: Endgame*. The Vision, a sentient android, was killed by Thanos, and his girlfriend Wanda was devastated.

So it's strange when the TV show opens up to an *I Love Lucy*-style, black & white sitcom style. Oh... and Vision is alive?

The second episode channels *Bewitched*... including the turn to color.

And every episode after that moves through the decades channeling sit-com after sit-com. *The Brady Bunch*. *Full House*. *Modern Family*.

We finally learn that Wanda is using her powers to create a false reality. She's been so devastated by her grief over losing her partner that she's escaped into a reality of her own design. In the process, she's taken over a small town, using her powers to force the town to play parts in her perfect sit-com life.

The series received well-deserved acclaim as one of Marvel's most honest and emotional creations to date. While it wasn't perfect, it illustrated how powerful our self-deception can be.

So let's talk about that today: why do we lie to ourselves? And how can we learn to face the truth in the light of God?

Because here's the good news: the light of truth is better than the darkness of our self-deception. What waits for us in the light is not condemnation and judgment but hope!

Message

Welcome to CataVision! This summer, we're going to explore some of our most beloved television shows. Why? Because we're practicing listening well and creating spiritual conversations.

The shows we're engaging have been popular, which indicates they resonate with us. There's something about them that connects with us - not just as individuals, but at a cultural level. So this summer, we're going to ask, "Why?" What message in these shows is resonating? And how do we engage that message in a faith-filled way?

So that's what we're doing this summer: first, listening to the show and second, responding in faith.

Since we ripped off the title and logo of WandaVision, we felt it was only right to start with that show - even though it's pretty recent.

The central message of WandaVision is about self-deception. Rather than face her grief, Wanda created a false reality that hurt not only her but a lot of people around her. By creating faux-sit-coms, Wanda literally hid in an idealized version of the past.

It shouldn't be a surprise that a show like this resonates with us.

We're a people familiar with grief. That's always been true, but the last year and a half of pandemic has brought that into sharp focus. Even now, as we're beginning to put the threat of Coronavirus behind us, we're finding relationships are different. Institutions are different. We've been talking about the 'new normal' for months, but we're in so many ways grappling with what exactly that new normal is going to look like.

And, just like Wanda, there's a real temptation for us when we grieve to try to ignore the new reality. We look backwards, toward what we label the "Good Ole Days". We idealize what used to be - just like those sitcoms of yesteryear.

And, as WandaVision illustrates, there's a real cost to that sort of willful ignorance. It keeps us from healing. Our desire to look backwards, to live in an idealized version of the past, traps others in our lives there, too. Living backward keeps us all from growing, healing and experiencing what's next.

It's that self-deception at the core of WandaVision I want to explore with you today.

BREAK

Turn with us to [James 1](#).

This is a letter many scholars believe was written by James the brother of Jesus. James was a key leader in the early church, and his letter is a meditation on what it looks like to live faithfully. It's a deeply practical letter. Let's hear James' words, and pay attention to James' warning against deceiving ourselves.

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for

orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. -- James 1:19–27
NLT

What does it mean to be God's people? James begins with a warning against rushing to anger, and insists that when we rush to anger, we actually miss how God wants to transform us.

Which is a fascinating observation because it's all too true. How often when we're confronted with our own sin do we react with patience, listening and kindness?

Not very often. When someone calls you out, or when you come face to face with the consequences of your actions what do we do?

Yeah... we get angry. It's a defense mechanism. As we've talked about other times, anger is what psychologists call a secondary emotion. It's your emotional momma bear, rising up to protect something vulnerable.

Now that *can* be good. We get angry at things like abuse and trafficking because they're evil. We know that exploiting vulnerable people is wrong, so we get angry when we see it happen.

But you know what else is vulnerable? Our egos.

And when we're confronted with how we're wrong, our egos bruise easily. That triggers our anger, too.

So when we get angry, how do we know whether it's the righteous kind of anger or the selfish kind? How do we know if our anger is at injustice, or if it's just trying to protect our fragile egos?

Well, when we're angry it's hard to tell.

Which is why James says we have to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

In WandaVision, Wanda refused to listen to everyone. At even the slightest hint of discomfort, she used her magic to alter the environment or even people's minds to remove the discomfort.

But if we're serious about being changed, if we really want to grow, we have to be able to hear things we don't like.

As Dr. Jeanne Orjala Serrao observes in her commentary on James:

James insists that everyone needs to be instantly ready to listen to one another. Listening quickly is not speed-hearing. To be quick to listen requires an ongoing commitment to hear carefully and clearly what others are actually saying, explicitly and implicitly. This requires hearing their words and sensing their underlying feelings. Such listening requires slow and thoughtful reflection before people decide to speak in reply. People too often really listen only after the volume of a conversation has been turned up. Then discussions tend to become arguments and anger flares quickly. -- Dr. Jeanne Orjala Serrao, *James: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*

Whew. Can you feel that? How often do we ignore the pain and suffering of others until the volume gets turned up? How often do we try to just keep our heads down and get by, ignoring other voices until they're shouting at us?

How different would our relationships look if we checked in with each other regularly, when things are cool, and made a point to listen?

How different would our workspaces be if we focused on people more than projects?

How much more could we learn if we make a point to *listen* to voices who are different from us rather than react with defensiveness?

BREAK

Quick to listen and slow to anger is something we struggle with culturally, too. Earlier this month, for instance, our Texas state legislators passed a bill aimed at preventing state schools from utilizing Critical Race Theory in Texas classrooms.

Their explicitly stated goal is to keep people from feeling guilty or ashamed when learning about US history.

Sound familiar? Like Wanda, our Texas legislators want to create a mythical, idealized past where the sins of racism and white supremacy are minimized if not outright ignored.

In doing so, they're of course hurting people of color. Both Black and Latin Americans have a long history in Texas of being on the receiving end of injustice and oppression - a long history we are choosing to ignore, rather than work to make right.

The civil unrest of the last several years is a perfect example of people "turning up the volume" on this conversation around racial justice - and yet rather than listening, those of us in power are reacting out of anger. We feel attacked, ashamed, guilty. But rather than rushing to listen, we're rushing to legislate.

James warned us long ago that such a path will not make us righteous. If we choose to close our ears to the voices of others, we end up closing our ears to God as well. We become like a person who sees their reflection, studies it intently, and then walks away and can't remember what we look like.

That's a shocking claim, isn't it? That if we don't learn to listen to other people, we won't be able to hear God?

But James knows we're masters of self-deception. We naturally remake God in our own image, only listening to the parts of Jesus' good news we like and ignoring the rest. Justifying our sin.

BREAK

To be changed, we have to be open to what's not like us. We have to be willing to admit we're wrong. That's where other people come in. We are much more like any human than we are like

God, so when we practice listening to others - especially those who aren't like us, we learn to be open to God.

And *that* sets us up to be wise enough to judge our anger. As Dr. Serraro says:

James does not exclude either the possibility or the necessity of anger. But he implies that anger is justified only after people have thought about the issues and weighed the value of anger in the situation. The reason for anger should come from reflection on "the word of truth" (1:18). -- Dr. Jeanne Orjala Serrao, *James: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*

There are lots of good reasons to be angry (that's even true in WandaVision - Wanda learns that a shadowy agency wants to resurrect Vision for their own ends - enslaving him, essentially).

We should be angry about racial injustice, about the unwillingness of our lawmakers to enact substantive changes.

We know that God gets angry, and since we're made in God's image, that means our anger can be good and holy as well.

What makes God angry is the exploitation and harming of the most vulnerable. It's why James insists that true religion isn't the one that reads a Bible verse or hears a sermon and leaves unchanged.

True religion, pure religion, religion that God loves is the religion that compels us to care for the orphan and widow - the most vulnerable in our society. This is what holiness and righteousness look like. As James would say, it's how we can measure faith.

Facing our self-deception is painful. As we knew she must, Wanda finally comes face to face with hard truth that the Vision she loves is not really her husband. The life she's created is a lie, and she's actively hurting a whole bunch of people to maintain that lie.

In her tearful goodbye to Vision, he offers her something that likely doesn't feel like powerful in the moment. But he suggests possibility - that this exchange need not be their end.

He offers her *hope*. Hope that they will continue in some meaningful way. (And, of course, this being a superhero tale, we know he's right.)

For we who follow Jesus, we can do even better. We know that yes, facing the truth about ourselves and our history will be painful. But we also know it is *good*. Because when we embrace truth we are embracing the one who calls himself the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to know him and be known by him, to gather and to be gathered together.

How have I been honest with myself in the last week?

When have I tried to hide from or ignore truth about myself?

How can I sit with God in truth and love this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.