

Scripture

Genesis 1:1–5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalm 29

- 1 Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendor.

- 3 The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.
- 4 The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

- 5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- 6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

- 7 The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
- 8 The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

- 9 The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”

- 10 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.
- 11 May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Mark 1:4–11

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after

me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Scripture: Voices

Over the past month I’ve heard a lot of hoarse voices. It seems that a particular strain of cold or flu has been going around that seems to zero in on the voice box. I had it in early December, and I’ve noticed it in many of you as well. I did a memorial service on a Sunday afternoon that was barely understandable, and on the Monday I had to ask Nancy not to forward any calls to me because I couldn’t really make myself heard properly – I had to work through emails and by squeaking out messages to Nancy.

These things happen, and although it is inconvenient, it is not the end of the world. Our voices always seem to come back, sometimes to the disappointment of those around us.

More troubling, though, is when God’s voice seems to go silent. Often this seems to happen at the worst possible moments: when the doctors are speaking with hushed voices and we are facing a difficult operation; when a marriage is falling apart around us and there seems to be nothing left but hurt and hurting; when a child gets into trouble with the law and we have no power to intervene, no power to save them. At these times when it feels as though God is no longer speaking with us and that we are on our own we wonder where our help will come from. It’s a dark and lonely place to be.

Now, we know that God doesn’t get laryngitis. God is not stuck in bed with the flu. Why don’t we hear his voice? What are we to make of our lonely times?

The lectionary readings this morning all have to do with voice, specifically the voice of God. This is a little unusual – often it takes some digging and even a little imagination to figure out why particular scriptures are grouped together. This week the scriptures are a little more straightforward, which is helpful since the questions we are asking are not.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

In the very beginning was nothing. Everything was formless and void – a void is an absence – an absence of anything, of everything. In a void there is no form because there is nothing at all. There is nothing to see, no reference points. There is no up or down, over here or over there, there isn’t even light and dark. Nothing.

Our minds rebel at the thought of void – we want to populate the void with something – at the very least we need to put a border around it – an edge. Something upon which to fixate or focus. As the verse opens with the formless void our minds scramble for something to seize upon, something solid. Then we hear that the wind or Spirit of God was over the face of the waters and we relax and picture something like a dark ocean, stretching out to forever.

It's a false picture – let it go. It isn't what the author intended. 'The water' is a representative phrase, that points to something else, something abstract. In this century when we speak of 'the man' we don't mean a person – 'the man' is any authority figure; government, school, our employer. 'The man' is not concrete, 'the man' points to an abstraction of power and authority.

So it is with the waters and the deep. At the time that Genesis was written, 'the waters' were representative of chaos – the incomprehensible nothingness out of which everything emerged. To those who lived millennia ago, water had no form, no structure. It is both present, and yet insubstantial.

Waters represent the mysteries of conception, gestation, and birth. Waters cover vast areas of the earth and obscure whatever lies below. Water is chaos; it represents the unknown and the unknowable.

Genesis tells us that in the midst of this dizzyingly incomprehensible, unknowable, dark, fearful, chaotic nothingness God spoke. The word of God broke forth as the only thing in existence with any structure or meaning.

Sound is transmitted through waves – compressions and decompressions – there is pattern and order present in sound. A voice even more so. Voices transmit information. Even in the absence of words, a cry communicates fear, anger, loss. Parents have all experienced how much information can be packed into a wordless cry.

The voice of God, echoing throughout the chaos, burst forth bringing into existence information, intention, and power. Imagine the voice of God in the beginning; what kind of sounds it would make. A cataclysmic detonation, stars exploding into being, planets crashing into one another as galaxies and star systems took shape and began spreading out, settling into the more peaceful states of equilibrium that we see today.

The voice of God is awesome; it is loud, it is willful, it is irresistible. And it is terrifying in its power. The Israelites wandering in the desert were afraid of God's voice. They insisted that Moses go away, up a mountain, to hear from God.

The Psalmist also writes of God's voice in this way.

'the God of glory thunders over mighty waters.

The voice of the Lord is powerful;

the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.'

The awesomeness of God is described by the loudest, most impressive noise that the ancient Israelites would have known. The writer describes a massive storm moving inland from the Mediterranean Sea to the mountains of Lebanon in the north, down through the Jordan Valley, and south out into the wilderness of Kadesh.

Seven times the voice of the Lord thunders in text, breaking the cedars, flashing forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl. Imagine the power that twists a mighty oak tree until it shatters with a spray of fibres.

The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness. When the lord of hosts speaks, the very foundations of life are shaken, for it is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

In the creation story, and in Psalm 29, the voice of God is powerful, strong, and undeniably present. It is this voice that tells us in no uncertain terms that God is cosmic in scope – not just a God for us to tuck away in a quiet corner of our hearts. God is an untamed God who designs and creates galaxies for his own pleasure. It is this voice of power that we long for when God seems silent, yet it is also this same voice that when people hear it, sends them running for cover.

In Genesis and in Psalm 29 God speaks and creation reels before his power. Our gospel reading provides us with a contrasting example of God speaking, one in which God speaks in a gentler voice so that we are not as overwhelmed by the sheer force and can actually hear the words that God is saying.

That is not to say that Jesus' baptism was a quiet and placid affair. Already it was a chaotic scene – John the Baptizer waist deep in the water, with dozens or hundreds of people surrounding him. Scripture tells us that all of Jerusalem were out to be baptized; likely this was an exaggeration, but certainly there were many, many people there milling about, talking, praying, worshipping. Amidst this John was busy dunking people one after another in the water and calling out in a loud voice for all the people of Israel to repent and turn back to their God. In some respects it was reminiscent of the original chaos – formless and void.

When it was Jesus' turn to be baptized the heavens were torn apart – I like some of the older translations that declare the heavens were rent asunder. That would have stilled the crowd for a moment, the realization that the cosmic God was present among them.

I don't know what that being rent asunder looked like – if it was an enormous clap of thunder, clouds parting to let the sun shine through, or if daylight itself split to allow a view of the stars above – but somehow the heavens themselves were torn apart, and in the stillness that followed a voice broke forth from heaven.

‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ This is a blessing, from the Father to the Son. Later on in Mark we will hear similar words as Peter, James, and John witness the transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain top. On the mountain top God says ‘This is my son, the beloved.’ It is an announcement meant for those present and for us. But this time, in the valley, in the river, God says ‘You are my son, my beloved.’ These words are meant for Jesus.

With these words God bestows an identity upon Jesus. When Jesus came to be among us he emptied himself – this is what Paul means when he writes of Jesus humbling himself. Jesus gave up his divine power; he limited himself in flesh. We don’t know how much this emptying applied to his awareness of himself and who he was. Certainly the episode of referring to the temple as his father’s house lets us know that Jesus was not ignorant of who he was, but we don’t really know how much foreknowledge Jesus had at this point before he began his ministry.

The voice from heaven that came to Jesus in the river as the spirit descended, or maybe dive-bombed, like a bird, was God naming and blessing his son. You are my son. That confers a title, a place.

By calling Jesus his son God is saying ‘You are like me; you are *of* me.’ Sons and daughters have rights and privileges that others do not. They inherit from us – not only what we own, but in many ways who we are. They inherit our noses, our hair, our good humour, or our propensity for adventure. Likewise Jesus, as the Son of God, carries within him all the properties of God.

When Jesus is named as the Son of God, God is simultaneously claiming Jesus as his own and giving Jesus the power and the authority of the Godhead. Because he bears his Father’s image and name, Jesus is God on earth.

After giving Jesus the identity of Son, God gives him the identity of beloved. Translations vary; some say ‘the beloved,’ others say ‘whom I love.’ It makes no difference. God expresses his love of his son unconditionally and unreservedly. ‘In you I am well pleased.’

At the time of this pronouncement, Jesus hadn’t begun his ministry. One would assume that he was a good kid for Mary and Joseph, an honest carpenter in the family business, and based upon his debating skills in the temple it would seem that he was also a good student of the Torah. But he hadn’t done any ‘son of God’ stuff yet. No miracles, no healings, no deliverances, no feedings – not even any wine.

What was God so pleased about, then? What we learn from this heavenly declaration of love is not that Jesus was beloved because he was so awesome, though I’m sure he was. We learn that Jesus was beloved because God is awesome. It is God’s property to love and this is something that is crucial for us to understand properly, otherwise we will live our lives backwards.

Notice the order of things: Jesus was told he was loved and made secure in his identity, then he went on to do amazing and miraculous things. First came love, then good works and obedience. First came identity, then came authority and power.

Too often we live life in the other direction. We try to do things to win the Father's love. We think that if we are obedient, and if we follow all the rules, and if we never look at another woman or man, if we never drink, or smoke, or curse, or eat meat on Friday, or get a tattoo, then God and everyone else will see how good we are and they will all know that we are a Christian. Then we will be secure in who we are.

This doesn't work. It doesn't work because the motivation is fear – fear of failing, fear of not measuring up, fear of humiliation. We work to earn approval, but since we don't really know where God draws the line we never really know if we have that approval. The best we can do in that situation is to judge ourselves in comparison to those around us, which leads to competitiveness and petty divisiveness – hardly the Kingdom values that Jesus proclaimed.

This is part of why Luther stressed so heavily that salvation is not something we earn through our own efforts, but is a gift of grace. Our actions are a response to grace, not a precondition.

Let's return to Jesus' baptism and God's pronouncement. Other gospels tell us that John was hesitant to baptize Jesus, but Jesus insisted that this is the way things needed to happen. Later on he urged his followers to baptize others as he had been baptized.

When we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we also gain an identity. We take on the identity of the Christ, and we participate in that holy moment down on the banks of the Jordan river. The words of God are applied to us.

You are my child, whom I love. I am so pleased with you.

Know that you are loved. Be secure in your standing with God. Once you accept your identity and place you will gain the strength and the authority to stand firm no matter what you might face. Your identity is what you need during those times when God's voice seems to be silent – and those times will come.

Jesus himself had a time like this. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When Jesus could not hear his Father's voice all he had was his memory of that time when he saw the heavens rent asunder and heard the voice of his Father declare that Jesus was loved – not for what he did, but for who he was.

We hold onto the very same words, and the same thought. If we are loved because of who we are, not because of what we have done, then whatever calamity we find ourselves in we can be secure knowing that this did not befall us because we displeased God, and that our trials do not mean that God has stopped loving us.

The opposite is true. Whether we are aware of it or not, God is continually speaking. You are my child. I love you, I am pleased with you, and I will never leave you.