

Sermon – “The Voice of God”

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Sunday, January 10, 2016

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Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 43:1-7. Often it is easy to feel alone and forgotten in life’s difficult times. These words were given to God’s people in just such a time, as they return to rebuild their home in Israel following their exile in Babylon, around 538 B.C.E. God’s voice, through the prophet, brings hope to the people God has called by name. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of ancient Hebrew Scripture.

1 But now thus says the Lord, God who created you, O Jacob, God who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. 4 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. 5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6 I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— 7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

On this celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, our second scripture reading is Luke 3:15-16, 21-22. The baptism of Jesus, at age 30 is the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus was born into a culture with rigid social customs. For a person like Jesus, the son of a manual laborer from out-of-the-way Nazareth, the right to speak in public or interpret the Torah would need to be established. Luke tells readers that Jesus receives this authority directly from God at his baptism. This voice from heaven gives both authenticity and authority to Jesus’ ministry. The text asks us to make space for God’s voice in our lives; a voice that tells us we, too, are God’s beloved. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The title of the sermon: “The Voice of God”

The text: “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”
Luke 3:22b

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for your clear and strong voice creating the world and for your “still, small voice” speaking to us, time and time again, in tender and unexpected ways. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters... God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Our Scriptures begin with the voice of God creating the world. The metaphor of God's voice is clear and distinct. We cannot see God, but we can hear God. God's voice creates, sustains, disciplines and comforts.

The voice of God is heard in the chaos before creation, in the thunder of the rainstorm and in the stillness after the earthquake, wind and fire. God's voice calls to the children of Israel before they pass through the deep waters on their way home and to Jesus of Nazareth at the Jordan River on the day of his baptism.

Through the power of the spoken word and oral tradition, our faith story has been passed from generation to generation of God's children listening for and discerning the voice of God amid the other voices in life.

We speak of the voice of God as a metaphor to make a distinction from hearing a literal voice. I spent the final semester of my undergraduate degree working in the psychiatric unit of Louisville General Hospital, as a part of a special study program in the Psychology Department of Hope College. There I learned of the pain and suffering individuals and their family experience because of mental illness. One of the symptoms of schizophrenia is hearing voices and some persons with schizophrenia believe the voices they hear are the voices of God. The voice is punitive and tells them to do hurtful things to themselves and sometimes to others.

Dr. Wayne Oates, one of the pioneers of Pastoral Counseling, directed an independent study for me that semester. He wrote a book entitled *When Religion Gets Sick*. In it, he contends that religion gets sick when people get sick. Conversely people who are psychologically healthy, with personal insight tend to have a healthier faith and more discernment about how God's voice is revealed in Scripture.

If the voice is a powerful part of who God is; it is also a powerful part of who we are. Newborn infants respond to the voice of their mother with an unusual familiarity and trust because these are the sounds they have heard for several months within the womb. Youth long for affirmation and identity in the voices of their parents and peers. As we grow older, the voices of dear friends, family and members of our faith community provide a comfort and healing in ways we cannot fully comprehend. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by the unexpected waters of life these are the voices that sustain us and uphold us.

I remember the first time I heard my husband Peter's voice on the telephone. It was Friday, March 8, 1991 around noon. It was my day off and I was cleaning my apartment. I hadn't met him in person, however I was anticipating his call. I heard a kindness and yet, a strength in his voice that attracted me to him. It is a voice that has become a stronghold, a rock for me over the years.

Today, as we commemorate Jesus' baptism and remember our own, we hear the echo of words spoken to God's people, through the prophet Isaiah, in another time and another place.

But now thus says the Lord, The one who created you, the one who formed you... "Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you."

In the voice of God we hear the commitment and affirmation of the One who created us, the One in whose eyes we are precious, and honored and loved. In Jesus' ministry of compassion and inclusion we hear the voice of God once again. A voice we can recognize because it does not drown out the voices of others, it does not dominate but rather it gives buoyance, raising others up to speak truth to power.

Today, we reaffirm the baptismal covenant made and kept on our behalf within this community of faith. The voice of God, which spoke from the clouds at Jesus' baptism, still speaks today. It speaks a word of love and promise to all who are baptized, offering identity and belonging. And it speaks a word of courage and confidence as we begin a new year in our life together.

The week before last a dear friend from childhood sent an email wishing a group of us known as the Chicago Chicks a happy new year. The Chicago Chicks were in Young Life together on the far south side of Chicago in the 70's. Today we live all over the United States and get together every other year for a reunion. Reading the various responses from each of the Chicago Chicks as we enter a new year, I was struck in particular by one.

Polly DeYoung Weiler lives in North Carolina and is the mother of four. Last Spring she was driving her 15 year old daughter (a change of life surprise) and a friend when they were struck by a person driving while intoxicated. Polly took the brunt of the hit and spent several months this past year in the hospital and rehab recovering from several broken bones, a head injury that affected her sight, lost teeth and various other calamities. She has walked through these unexpected high waters with grace and a renewed sense of herself as a beloved child of God. Her email was a simple, one liner which spoke volumes... a quote from Hebrew scripture, Proverbs 31:25.

She is clothed with strength and dignity and laughs without fear at the future.

May we each have the same courage on our journey into the New Year, strengthened by the voice of the One to whom we belong; the One who created the waters and who promises to be with us when we pass through them. Amen.