Sermon – "God's Voice"
Scripture Readings – Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Sunday, January 12, 2025
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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 43:1-7. Often it is easy to feel alone and forgotten in 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 these ancient Hebrew scriptures.

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. 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. 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. Because you are precious in my sight, honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 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— everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." Amen.

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, 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. Luke tells readers the voice from heaven gives both authenticity and authority to Jesus' ministry. Hear now what the Spirit is saying through Holy Scripture.

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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." Amen.

The title of the meditation: "God's Voice"

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 of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth… 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, discerns, 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 from the exile and to Jesus of Nazareth at the Jordan River on the day of his baptism.

If God's voice is essential to who God is; it is also essential to who we are and those who are closest to us. Newborn infants respond to the voice of their mother with unusual familiarity because these are the sounds they have heard within the womb. In our youth we long for affirmation in the voices of our parents and faith community. In fact, without these voices of affirmation it is difficult to find a sense of identity and belonging. As we grow older, we find affirmation in the voices of family, friends, and our faith community. These are the voices that provide strength, comfort, and healing in ways we cannot fully understand. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by the unexpected waters of life, these are the voices that sustain and uphold us.

As we honored the life and voice of President Jimmy Carter this week with respect and appreciation for the century he lived and the difference he made as a Statesman and ambassador of hope, I was particularly struck by the image of a burnt flag at half mask in a photo of the devastating wind and fire in the City of Los Angeles where I spent three years studying theology. The resilience, dignity, and courage of the first responders and firefighters spoke volumes amid the tragedy that silenced our nation. Whether we are facing overflowing flood waters in North Carolina, overwhelming fires in California, or climate devastation elsewhere, we long for voices that speak the truth about our circumstances, voices that are thoughtful and constructive, voices that are kind and humane.

In as much as we find strength in the voices of those closest to us, it is our own voice we must ultimately find. Many of us spend our lifetime discovering our voices and the courage to speak and live what we believe.

The voice of God, which spoke from the clouds at Jesus' baptism, speaks to us today… a word of love and promise to all who are baptized, offering identity and belonging within the community of faith. As we commemorate Jesus' baptism and remember our own, in today's

scripture we hear the echo of the words spoken to God's people, by the prophet Isaiah, in another time and place when they were silenced by tragedy.

But now thus says the one who created you, the one who formed you… "Fear not, I have called you by name. 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. For I am the Lord your God, your Savior. You are precious in my sight and honored and I love you.

Through the ancient prophet's voice, we hear the promise and affirmation of the One who created us, the One who envisions us to be more than we are, and the One who gives us each a voice for the journey that we are called to travel.

In Jesus' ministry of compassion and inclusion we hear God's voice 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 find their own voice, and to speak truth to power. In Christ's ministry, God's voice calls us to commit ourselves to travel through deep waters into the world.

In the ancient baptismal imagery, the old self is drowned in the waters and a new self is risen with Christ. Let us remember this imagery as we reaffirm our baptismal vows and celebrate with joy and gratitude that whatever lies ahead on the roads we travel, God journeys with us, in us, through us, and before us. Halleluiah! Amen.