

Sermon – “The Power of Speech”

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Sunday, January 9, 2022

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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 these ancient Hebrew scriptures.

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." Amen.

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 love that Jesus later proclaims in his ministry is first extended to him now. The text asks us to make space to hear God’s voice in our life—a voice we share with those around us; a voice that tells us we, too, are God’s beloved. Hear now the Word of God.

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." Amen.

The title of the sermon: “The Power of Speech”

The text: *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. Isaiah 43:1*

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...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.

If the voice is a powerful part of who God is; it is also a powerful part of who we are and those who are closest to us. 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. In our youth we long for the affirmation in the voices of our parents. 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 good friends, the community of faith and those with whom we share our lives. These are the voices that 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.

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, still speaks in lives today. It speaks a word of love and promise to all who are baptized, offering identity and belonging within the community of faith. Today as we commemorate Jesus’ baptism and remember our own we hear the echo of the words spoken to God’s people, by 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, the One who will never give up on us; never quit—never ever. 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 the truth to power.

Rebecca Button Prichard reminds us in Sensing the Spirit that God's voice is heard in both silence and speech. God's voice is heard in the gentle whisper, in the still, small voice in the center of our being and in the cries of the voiceless. God's voice is heard when we cry out to God in prayer, praise and song, yet also when we wait in quietness and longing.

In the ancient baptismal imagery, the old self is drowned in the waters and a new self rises with Christ. Let us remember this imagery as we reaffirm our baptismal vows. Now God journeys with us, in us, before us, through the river of glory and into the world.

As the ancient prophets spoke in the past and as the voice of our beloved choir affirms today:

Behold, believe and be baptized.

So be it. Amen.