

The Voice of God

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

The Baptism of Jesus - January 10, 2021

Texts: Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Mark 1:4-11

Genesis 1:1-5

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. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalm 29

One Hebrew name for God for which we have no good translation, but which is commonly rendered LORD, occurs 18 times in this short psalm. When we hear a word that frequently, we can miss the power it originally held. For that reason, we speak it today in other words.

Ascribe to the Holy Name, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Holy Name glory and strength.

**Ascribe to the Holy Name the glory due the name of God;
worship the Holy Name in sacred splendor.**

The voice of the Holy Name is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders, the Holy Name, over mighty waters.

**The voice of the Holy Name is powerful;
the voice of the Holy Name is full of majesty.**

The voice of the Holy Name breaks the cedars;
the Holy Name breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

**God makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Holy Name flashes forth flames of fire.**

The voice of the Holy Name shakes the wilderness;
the Holy Name shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

**The voice of the Holy Name causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare; and in God's temple all cry, "Glory!"**

The Holy Name sits enthroned over the flood;
the Holy Name sits enthroned as ruler forever.

**May the Holy Name give strength to the people!
May the Holy Name bless the people with peace!**

GOSPEL READING Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove onto him - *into* him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased - in you I delight." And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

Thanks be to God.

Words hold power.

Words can heal.

Words can kill.

God's voice brought the world into being. God's Word creates.

God's voice called the world good. God's Word blesses.

God's voice named Jesus Beloved Son. God's Word exalts.

God's Word created us in the image of God with the power to speak -- words of power.

Long before the Bill of Rights was imagined, God's Wisdom gave us freedom of speech:

Freedom to use words for good or for ill.

Our words can heal or kill; create or destroy; bless or curse; exalt or debase.

Even words spoken only in the silence of our hearts can change us for better or for worse.

We have seen this week how words have been used for destructive purposes.

We have named them as grievously, sinfully wrong.

God speaks to us and asks: "What do *you* say today? What will you say tomorrow?"

Please pray with me: God, Holy Name, Holy Word, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen

People of God, beloved of the Beloved, the words that have come to me most readily since seeing and hearing the atrocities committed at our Capitol, are words of sadness, perplexity, and loss. But words of outrage, disgust, and blame also come. I want to speak truthful words; I want to speak words that are just and fair. I don't want to mince words. Because if I ever doubted that words carry power, I don't doubt it anymore.

Some of the most telling words I've heard were uttered by one of our 100 Senators. They said something like this, about the last four years, with remorse: "I let myself refrain from speaking my truth." I wondered, how many of the other 99 could or would say the same? How many in our country? I could say it myself. How often did I just turn off the news, or shake my head and roll my eyes, or resort to the safety valve of sarcasm? How often did I let myself refrain from speaking my truth? And how often did I fail to form a practical working alliance with the people who are the targets of lies, or the targets of unchecked brutality, or whose voices were silenced? I am not talking about false claims of election fraud in 2020, but the facts of voter suppression enduring not for four years, but for a century and a half. How often did I fail to act on the truth that the burden of both pandemic and economic disaster have fallen with deadly injustice on those same people? My silence makes me complicit in the horrors of this week.

In some of the oldest and most powerful words of the Bible, Psalm 29, people in God's holy temple shout praise for the Holy Name, the Name that cannot be spoken, whose voice shatters the cedars, and shakes the wilderness, moves mountains, and strips forests bare. This is the power of the voice of God, the voice of the Holy Name. It seems to me that God's voice this week has spoken powerfully: it has laid bare the clear truth about the false words inciting these hateful, destructive acts. If you tell me that what I'm saying has no place in a church where your God is worshipped, then I will tell you I believe the Name of Jesus has no place on the same banner or in the same breath with the name of a frustrated and damaged man whose chief success as leader has been to lead trusting people astray, and spur on a hateful racially motivated riot in our nation's capitol.

But truth will not allow me to stop there. Because in some ways I have also made God in my own image, when I believe my god (small "g" intentional) condemns the same people I condemn. The God in whose image all humanity is made loves each person deeply, eternally, ceaselessly. The God who knows us better than we know ourselves judges us -- not to punish but to restore; and exposes lies -- not to shame the liar but to repair the damage they have done; and speaks hard truths to broken people -- not to cast them out like rubbish but to make them whole. And that is truth I want to claim, too.

Mark's Gospel speaks to us of John the baptizer, who baptized with water, but foretold one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was baptized, the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit of God flew like a dove, like a visible banner of peace, not just *onto* Jesus but *into* him. And the voice of God named him "Beloved Son, the One in whom I delight." And Jesus' baptism is critical to our understanding of ourselves as baptized sons and daughters of God. Baptism for us can never be only an outward show. If we "baptize" our bigotry and our prejudice and persuade ourselves God delights in this, that is no more than whitewash to cover the fear in our hearts: fear that others will displace us; fear that they will push us off the precarious perch of false superiority. Expose the lie of our white supremacy. We are afraid of Black, Indigenous, and

people of color because we know down deep that we have wronged them in word and deed. Don't let outward whitewash hide your own truth from you. True baptism, the baptism of Jesus, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, changes us from the inside out. The Spirit dives into the sickest, saddest, most fearful places in our souls and heals them from within. Then, what people see in us is not our goodness but the goodness of God, the humble righteousness of Christ. The peace of God that is beyond understanding.

God's Word gives us power to speak. God's Wisdom helps us choose to use our words for good. How will we use our words, going forward? How will our actions support our words? I challenge us, as beloved of the Beloved, to express in concrete, practical ways God's love, God's truth, God's peace. We may choose to act in company with the PCUSA, or the Presbytery, or ISAI AH, or Diversity Council. Opportunities abound. Today we are still reeling with what this week has revealed. Today, the voices in our heads may be too contradictory or confused for us to hear God clearly, or see a path forward. But there is a path to hope beyond this mess. All I am advocating - literally, all I am speaking for - is that we *commit* ourselves today to moving beyond outrage to speaking truth, and beyond speech to action.

In the words of William Sloane Coffin, peace activist, and ordained Presbyterian minister: "The world is too dangerous for anything but truth; and is too small for anything but love." Amen.

Prayers

Holy Name, Name above all names, your voice thunders over the divisions and hatreds tearing us apart and calls us back to truth. May your truth be our truth; and may we never be afraid to speak it.

Merciful father, wise mother, you know we have failed to live out our baptism, or to see our privilege as an opportunity to serve. Dive again into the broken places within our hearts and within our nation and cleanse us from our sin. Heal our land; give our elected officials words and wisdom to govern with humility and justice

Once again, so many more have died prematurely of the coronavirus, and yet so many of us fail to love the vulnerable by taking simple precautionary actions. Help us all understand that we are all responsible for the economic struggles of our neighbors, the safety of our students and teachers, the jeopardy of our healers, caregivers, essential workers.

When momentous and earth-shaking events seem to overwhelm us, let us not forget those nearest to us who need our care and love. And when distress is rampant, let us always remember that "though the wrong seems oft' so strong, you are the ruler yet;" you have the last word, and you bless your people with peace and with joy. To you, Holy Name, we pray as Jesus himself taught, "Our Father...."