
The Voice of the Lord

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Mark 1:4-11

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, January 7, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

There is a Bible story about when the prophet Elijah meets God at Mount Horeb. We are told that “there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence [or as the KJV says, ‘a still small voice.’] When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:11-13) If Elijah lived in our day, it would be very hard for him to hear that voice because in our day, it’s the loudest voices, the loudest protesters, the loudest political pundits that get public attention. No one seems to care about the still small voices in our society. But remember, just because you are loud doesn’t mean it is of God. This isn’t to undercut shouting churches because God speaks in shouts and whispers for God is polyvocal and regardless of the volume, the voice we need to hear is God’s and so many have prayed throughout the years, “silence in me any voice but your own.”

The voice of God to Elijah comes out of the sound of silence through a still, small voice after all of the noise. In the stillness. Have you ever heard God’s voice? Is it tenor, soprano, baritone, alto or bass? Is it raspy or smooth? Is it as soft as quiet contemplation in a monastery? Or can it be like the loud ringing of bells? How do we even know it is God’s voice that we hear? How can we be so sure? Some Christians are so sure that the voice they hear is always God and that they are always God’s mouthpiece. Faithful Christians have been discerning the voice of God for centuries through the study of the Scriptures, through prayer, through circumstances, through the community of faith. But do you know God’s voice?

I’m not talking about judging God’s voice as to its quality as if we’re talking about the TV show called “The Voice” where judges Adam Levine, Blake Shelton, Jennifer Hudson, and Miley Cyrus, choose the type of voice that best fits their teams and needs. God’s voice is not about our choice. How could it be that way, anyway, when it is God’s voice that gives us our voice, when it is God’s word that creates our life?

God’s voice gives us our voice, our breath, our first breath, our resonance, our life energy. We cannot speak unless we are spoken to, unless God speaks to us first, and that’s exactly what God does in the beginning in Genesis. As poet James Weldon Johnson writes, “And God stepped out on space, And he looked around and said: I’m lonely—I’ll make me a world.” God speaks the entire world into being for God is a speaking Being who is always doing. When God speaks, we receive the breath of God. God speaks and something happens. God said, “‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” And at the creation, God kept speaking and kept creating, day after day, night after night. God said and then it was. God loves to talk. God is the poet laureate of heaven. God’s voice creates. God’s voice illuminates. God’s voice brings us to voice, brings us to light, brings us into the light, gives us a vocation, a reason for living. Actually, we get the word ‘vocation’ from the Latin *vocare*,

which means ‘voice.’ God’s voice gives us our voice, our vocation, when God calls in still small voices or louder ones. God has a creation vocation *viva voce*.

We shouldn’t be surprised then in hearing that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1). When God wanted to ignite a new creation, God speaks the Word of God, and God’s Word is Jesus Christ. When God wanted to save and love the world, God speaks Jesus, the one who saves and loves. God’s Word does what God says. God walks God’s talk. There is integrity in who God is. As the Psalmist says, “the voice of the Lord is powerful.” “Without him not one thing came into being.” God doesn’t talk our ears off; God, by his word and voice, gives us our ears and this is important because ‘faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.’ The Word of God is what creates hearing. No wonder in our liturgies there is so much speaking—in the greeting, confession and pardon, prayers, scripture readings, singing, sermons, and benedictions. The word, just like God, is spoken and something happens. A new idea comes or we are comforted or even challenged. Words do things. This is God’s way in the world.

And the Word which creates life over primal waters, also voices an affirmation of love over the waters of baptism. When Jesus is baptized, a voice from heaven declares, “You are my Son, the beloved. With you, I am well pleased.” In the presence of the descending Spirit, just as in Genesis, the voice of God speaks new life over the waters and speaks, not ‘light’ this time, but love. “You are my son, my daughter, my child, the beloved one. With you, I am well pleased. It doesn’t matter what others have said, you are loved by me.” Just as in Genesis when we hear repeatedly that ‘it was good’ when God created, at Christ’s baptism, we hear the pleasure God has in him, therefore, God takes pleasure in us when we are baptized. “With you, I am well pleased.” God claims us as his beloved children through baptism, a sacrament of unconditional love. God speaks light and God speaks love. Who wouldn’t want to be a Christian when God speaks such words? God’s voice is one of creation and affirmation. But God’s voice is also one of transformation.

That God has a voice, that God speaks, is undeniable. This is why we keep preaching—we believe that God speaks! It’s the weekly Sunday miracle—God speaking. The Protestant tradition is a Word of God tradition, *sola scriptura*. And in our Psalm for the day, the phrase ‘the voice of the Lord’ is repeated seven times to grab our attention. The voice of the Lord. The voice of the Lord. The voice of the Lord. God has a voice and the Psalmist doesn’t want us to miss it. But what comes from the voice of the Lord and its effects may not always feel creative or comforting or loving; but it will always be transforming. “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare...”

The voice of God breaks, shakes, flashes, strips. God shakes up the world, the natural order—cedars and fire and the wilderness and the oaks and the forests. Nothing is a match for God and nothing and no one is immune from the impact of the voice of the Lord, nor do we want it that way because God’s voice never leaves things the same. And I’m sure there are things in the world or your life or on the job or in the environment that you would like to see change this year.

God always transforms situations but it may not be in the way we desire. The things we thought that were forever, strong and secure like the cedars or the oaks, are nothing before the voice of God.

They swirl and are broken when God speaks. God can make a forever, a never, and a never, a forever. The things we think are unbreakable, God breaks; the mightiest oaks are no match for the might of God. And that's the point—nothing can stop the voice of God and nothing is forever, except the Word of God. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of God will stand forever.

And this eternal Word shakes up our reality. That's because there's always transformation, always change, when God speaks, when the voice of the Lord is heard. Never sameness, but always difference. Light in darkness. Heavens torn apart and love expressed through baptism. Transformation amid stagnation, and the same old, same old. God can shake the very foundations of the earth and can do the same with your life. This is because God sits enthroned and reigns over everything.

God's voice that transforms the world from nothing to something is not unusual in that God changes God's own form by taking on human form in order to transform us. It is God's way to make new ways, new paths, new opportunities, to strip the forest, to shake the wilderness, to have the sunrise and sunset every day, in order to make the next day new. I don't know God to be status quo, to sing the same song, to play the same anthem, to use the same words every day, every year. God doesn't conform but transforms from the beginning until the ending when God's poetic voice cries out:

*Time shall be no more!
And the sun will go out like a candle in the wind,
The moon will turn to dripping blood,
The stars will fall like cinders,
And the sea will burn like tar;
And the earth shall melt away and be dissolved,
And the sky will roll up like a scroll.
With a wave of his hand God will blot out time,
And start the wheel of eternity.* (J. W. Johnson)

There's always the movement of transformation when God speaks. God moves over the face of darkness, over the calming waters, with a wind, a fire, a spirit that makes all things new. A new creation. A new son or daughter. A new reality through voice, spirit, water, and fire. This is what the voice of the Lord does—makes all things new. This is what the Lord desires to do with you this new year—make all things new and transform you.

The voice of the Lord is powerful enough to do it. It can make water a spiritual womb of new birth in Christ, make ordinary bread become Christ's body and turn wine into his blood. "The voice of the Lord is over the waters." And the voice of the Lord presides at the table for we hear the voice of God through the Word of God, Jesus Christ. Do you hear it? I hope so because we all need it.