

1 Epiphany
Christ and Grace
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Baptism of our Lord Psalm 29, Matthew 3:13-17
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I don't know about you, but when I read the Psalm for today, I was shaken by its power. I had a hard time reading it the way we usually read the psalms, quietly and reverently, measured. I wanted to shout it out. Another thing I noticed is that the word "voice" is used 8 times. I love this description of God's voice. The imagery is vivid and strong and just reading this psalm creates energy – listen!

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders; the Lord is upon the mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; a voice of splendor. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees, splits the flames of fire; shakes the wilderness. The voice of the Lord makes the oak tress writhe and strips the forests bare. And in the temple of the Lord all are crying, "Glory!" There are days when I long to hear the voice of God like that! And reading a psalm like this one is good for helping me get beyond my own petty problems and focus on the larger truth, on the truth that I am a beloved child of God and that it is by God's power, not my own, that I accomplish anything.

In our quiet time with God, in prayer or in reading the scripture, we may wonder if we are hearing God or not. We may question how we interpret the scripture as the word or voice of God in our lives. We all have a very human need to express things, to explain and to understand things, and we don't always do the best job of it. What one person thinks the scripture means is not at all what someone else thinks it means. And when we are unable to agree on what something means, on what God is saying, that can be when the conflict begins – within ourselves, in our relationships with others, in the larger church, and in the world.

We misinterpret one another all the time as well. We make assumptions, we hear what we want to hear, or we hear selectively. We can hurt others with words and words can bring pain to us. We carefully tell someone something important and then they promptly forget what we just told them. All our best intentions can be for naught if someone misunderstands what we have said. In all our human inability to hear one another, what on earth gives us the assurance that we are correctly hearing the voice of God? We all know of many events through church history, and indeed through world history, where those who insist they have heard the voice of God have done some pretty terrible things.

Jesus was revealed as God's son by a voice from heaven – God's voice. The baptism of Jesus is included in all four Gospels, and in Matthew's account, John the baptizer actually argues with Jesus. I love this because we do this too! All the while we are complaining that we cannot hear God's voice, we argue about what we know God is telling us we should be doing!

Today we hear that John would have prevented Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John knows Jesus doesn't need to be baptized to have his sins washed away. Jesus, unlike the rest of us, was without sin, and he answers John saying, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." I'm sure we all have days

when we, like John, can be pretty good at preventing Jesus from fulfilling all righteousness in this world.

Jesus didn't need baptism for himself, but in his fulfilling of all righteousness, he showed us that hearing is not quite the same as listening. To really listen is to decide to be in relationship, to respond to what we hear. For Matthew, righteousness is more than being good. Righteousness is closely connected to an awareness of the coming kingdom. Righteousness means deciding to be in relationship with Jesus as a faithful disciple – to participate in that kingdom. Righteousness is becoming aligned with God's deep desire for our wholeness. When Jesus tells John, "permit it to be so now, to fulfill all righteousness," he's saying, "Let's do this together! It's part of God's plan to redeem the world!"

So as Jesus heard and responded to God's voice, he modeled for us that we too are called by God, named by God at our baptism. He shows us what it looks like to be "called into righteousness" as the prophet Isaiah describes those of us in covenant relationship with God. We emerge from the waters of our baptism as Beloved children, called to be followers of Jesus, called into righteousness. When we live our lives listening for God's voice, for God's will and hope for us and for the world, it is righteous living.

What might we hear in this passage that pertains to our own call and life of discipleship? How might we identify with Jesus and his baptism? Unlike Jesus, I expect all of us have some sense of needing to repent, to receive forgiveness and to be reconciled to God and neighbor. But Jesus makes it clear that there is more to baptism than repentance and forgiveness. In our baptism we, no less than Jesus, are called into ministry, called to live in the right way, with God's help.

All of us are called by virtue of our baptism to ministry. We may not ever hear an audible voice, but we can hear God's voice through the scripture, through prayer, and through the encouragement of others. God speaks to us through nature. When I am driving along and see plastic bags stuck in the trees and in the grass along the road, I hear God's voice calling me to care more for creation.

God's voice also helps us discern where we might be called to ministry here at Christ and Grace. We may be called to serve as lectors or chalice bearers, sing in the choir, join the altar guild, provide hospitality or pastoral care, to teach, or help with outreach efforts. Wherever we see something that needs to be done, it might be God calling us to help. We might even hear God's voice calling us to use our passion and gifts to begin an entirely new ministry. To what have you been called by virtue of your baptism? Where is God's voice leading you to serve?

In a moment we will renew our baptismal vows. I invite you to listen for God's voice and remember that you are beloved. I also invite you to touch the water in the baptismal font (splash in it, even!), as you come forward for communion or on your way out into the world. Because here at the font is where the story of Jesus' baptism intersects with the stories of our own baptisms. For we can only live into the mission that God has set for us to the degree that we hear the good news and then share it; the good news that we, too, are beloved children of God. Baptism is nothing less than the promise that we belong to God; that no matter where we go,

God will be with us. In baptism we are marked as Christ's own forever, and given all that we need to listen for and respond to the voice of God.

Amen.