

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

Psalm 29

Mark 1:4-11

January 10, 2021

THE VOICE OF THE LORD

I stand before you as one who has never heard the audible voice of the Lord. I have heard about God's voice in various scriptural accounts, but of all the vibrations that have come through the air and hit my eardrums to then be interpreted by the auditory cortex of the temporal lobe of my brain, I have never considered the origin of the noise to be God's literal voice. Hollywood has imagined such a voice in various movies with quite a variety of actors playing the role including George Burns, Charlton Heston, Alanis Morissette, Whoopie Goldberg, Morgan Freeman, and Octavia Spencer. ¹ I'd be glad to hear from you which of those voices most resonate with you.

Psalm 29, which we heard earlier, poetically focuses on the voice of the Lord, seven times mentioning it in powerful imagery. You might remember that in the first creation story at the beginning of Genesis, God who creates the heavens and the earth speaks everything that is created into existence. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. That's a powerful voice! In the psalm, God's voice is compared with the potent forces of a mighty wind or an earthquake or lightning and thunder, but there is not in this psalm a description of what that voice says. In the concluding words of the psalmist, the affirmation is made that the Lord is enthroned over the most chaotic of forces followed by this expression of hope: "May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!"

Then in our reading from the Gospel of Mark, which was the earliest of the four gospel accounts, we hear about Jesus' baptism. We who affirm that Jesus was the only person who ever lived without sin may scratch our heads that his first act in this earliest of accounts describes him coming to be baptized. After all, this was an expression of repentance made seeking God's forgiveness of sins. John the Baptist offered this baptismal experience to the crowds from the region who came to him at the Jordan River. Through his baptism, Jesus chooses a radical association with every human who has been misguided at one point or another, who has based our

actions on what wasn't true, who has denigrated others, who needs forgiveness, who seeks God's grace. In doing so, he meets us where we are and points us toward the best of who we might become. As Jesus comes up from the water, we are told that he sees "the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." And then we hear an account of what the Lord's voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I have never heard the audible voice of the Lord, but there were other voices that made expression when I was baptized as a young child. I was too young to understand it at that point, but my mother and father and the Presbyterian congregation of which my family was a part took vows that day that they would raise me within the church so I might come to understand that I too was a beloved child of God. That loving message that had been spoken from heaven when Jesus was baptized had found expression once again, just as that divine voice is expressed with every baptism that is conducted here or elsewhere. You and I get to be the actors who portray and proclaim the powerful voice of the Lord when we participate in a baptism together, and in my mind, your voices, when you are doing that, resonate as the best representation of God's voice. For we get to echo the message from God that indicates that each one baptized is also a beloved child of God. At the same time, all of us who are baptized admit that we need God's love and grace to be at work in our lives. I wonder if we recognize how powerful those affirmations and vows are as we get to act out an expression of the voice of the Lord.

There were other powerful expressions made on Wednesday of this past week when a group of aggrieved citizens forced their way into our nation's capitol building. They did not realize that their anger was significantly based on untruths about the legitimate outcome of the presidential election. They wanted their raised and raging voices to be heard by those in power in an attempt to change the future, but sadly they wanted to silence the voices of millions of voters across the land in the process. And sadly all too many of them were hateful and murderous voices willing to kill and destroy so that their voices might have the most powerful sway.

However, the loudest voices are not always the most powerful ones. The last time I saw my father before he died last April, his voice was not strong, but his message was powerful. The same man who had held me in his arms at the baptismal font

when he and my mother promised to help me come to know the love of God in Jesus Christ, was the one whose hand I was holding as we said last words to one another. With a weak voice, but as a powerful expression of his heart, the last words he said to me that day and as it turned out the last words I ever heard from his voice were, “I love you, Kirb.” Thankfully he had told me that quite a few times prior to that point. One of those times had been right before I went to the front of the church to say my wedding vows with Nancy. “I love you, Kirb.” They were the exact same words and tone, that so powerfully touched me that day that Nancy was worried about my red eyes after she had processed to the front of the sanctuary for the wedding to begin. The memory of the words my dad said the very last time I heard his voice is something for which I am deeply grateful. It was with such expressions that my identity was formed as a beloved son. And I am thankful that he still said those words even after there had been times when my words or actions had disappointed him. There had been times particularly in my teenage years when I had expressed my rage toward him, sometimes based on an inaccurate understanding of reality, but still he said, “I love you, Kirb.” Powerful!

I’ve never heard the audible voice of the Lord, but I have heard voices that echo God’s expressions of love, that come through the baptismal waters. Such expressions are committed to connecting the love of God with the love of neighbor, with building up instead of tearing down. They are the kind of powerful words that I hope shape our identity and priorities so that we can use our voices and actions to reflect the love of God even toward those with whom we may significantly disagree and in whom we are disappointed. We recognize that for us, God’s love comes in spite of our misguided and sinful ways, which is one indication of its great power. A second indication of its great power is that divine voice expressed in baptism offers you and me an identity as beloved children of God that can transform our very hearts. It is a power that inspires us to see that we are called to work for a future based not on our own narrow interests, but on what is true, and on what is loving and just for all people.

I’ve never heard the audible voice of the Lord, perhaps you haven’t either. But you and I get to be the actors who get to portray that voice each time we baptize someone. In my mind, your voices, when you are doing that, resonate as the best representation of God’s voice, better than all the Hollywood actors. It is an

expression of that voice which shapes us through baptism. That's the voice that gives us the strength we need, that offers us the blessing of peace so that we can keep on being shaped by God's voice, and so we can be led wherever it calls us to go. There are a lot of loud and chaotic voices these days, but the voice that belongs to God, even as we do, is the most powerful one of all. Alleluia! Amen.

¹ <https://ew.com/movies/actors-who-have-played-god/>