

WHEN GOD SPEAKS
Sermon, January 8, 2023
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
First Sunday after Epiphany
Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Matthew 3:13-17

Liturgically speaking, thirty years have passed since Friday, when we in the Western church tradition officially commemorated Epiphany, the visit of the Magi to the newborn King. That newborn King is now thirty years old, presenting himself to John for baptism. John the Baptist appeared in the Judean wilderness proclaiming, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."* As people responded ... and people *did* respond; huge numbers came from all over ... confessing their sins, John would then baptize them in the Jordan River. On this day, though, one came forward who had no sin to confess. John initially resisted Jesus' request for baptism (*and this conversation is unique to Matthew's account*) and apparently wondered what Jesus was doing there. John knew there was something special about Jesus, and most likely knew that throughout their lifetimes. Remember, John and Jesus were related. We are told by Luke that John's mother, Elizabeth, was a kinswoman of Jesus' mother Mary, and that the expectant Mary had stayed with the expectant Elizabeth for a while before both boys were born. The two boys certainly had contact over the past thirty years. Maybe they played together as children; maybe they went to the mall together (*or whatever the first century equivalent would be*) as teenagers. Whatever their relationship, it appears evident John held his younger kinsman in awe. John's baptism was for repentance; Jesus had never sinned, and had no need to be here. So John protests, *"I need to be baptized by you, [why] do you come to me?"* and Jesus says, *"Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."*

There is so much that could be said about Jesus' somewhat cryptic reply, so to keep this from going into your lunch hour, I put it on an insert you can read on your own and included it in the bulletin. For now, I'll just point out that Jesus is not coming to have His past washed away; rather, He is stepping up to embrace His future. One might say He is stepping up to accept His *commission*, this is something akin to an ordination ceremony as He commences His public ministry. Jesus has no sinful past to wash away, as we do. But still He is baptized. As He is baptized, He is stepping up to embrace His future, affirming His identity and accepting His calling and equipping and mission as God's Son. Christian baptism is about having the past washed away, but not only that; it's about stepping into the future embracing our identity and our calling, our commission and our equipping as God's sons and daughters.

Now, hold that thought a moment.

"The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic." Thus is the voice of God described in Psalm 29, as read in our Call to Worship. Psalm 29 also reads, *"the voice of the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon, the voice of the Lord shakes the desert, the voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare."* The powerful Voice that leaves sturdy oaks twisting and blows over cedar forests like so many toothpicks is the same voice speaking from the heavens at our Lord's baptism. In his book, Who Speaks for God, Charles Colson wrote, *"We live in an age when some Christians glibly toss around clichés like 'God told me' this or that. Some preachers, especially a few I've seen on television, sound like they've just hung up from a private telephone session with God immediately before going on the air. Our biblical forebears had no such casual view of God's holy voice. When the children of Israel heard the voice of God, they fell on their faces. They marveled they heard the voice of God and lived!"*

I've been in ministry long enough to say with confidence that I'm dubious at best when I hear someone say, *"God spoke to me."* The late Rev. Jerry Falwell once said, *"I think most ministers who claim they've heard God's voice are eating too much pizza before they go to bed at night, and it's really an intestinal disorder, not a revelation."* Whenever I hear someone say, *"God told me ..."* I want to reply, *"How? Did you hear a voice? What kind of voice? If not an audible voice, how did you distinguish between your own thoughts or desires or hormonal influences and the voice of the God?"* Some of you may remember the story I told (*in 2011 and 2005*) from when my late wife and I had just started dating; we were both employed in Germany at the time. There was this Australian fellow in our church who was convinced he had heard God speak. He said he was walking along the Rhine River late at night (*which ran right through our little community*) and he heard God's voice say, *"Here is Ann."* And, apparently, God continued and told him he would marry Ann. Now, the funny thing was God never told Ann (*personally, I thought the fellow had consumed one too many Fosters*). Weeks later, this guy apparently heard from God again. He started asking to borrow large

sums of money from people, and one of Ann's more gullible colleagues loaned him \$5,000. When we asked him, "Why?" the colleague replied this Aussie told him God had spoken, telling him he was about to win the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes. In case you were wondering, he didn't win the sweepstakes. And Ann never married him; she married me. Now, you can either believe God was wrong, or you can believe this man was a bit ... delusional. As you might imagine, it was a bit of a scary time for Ann. But the really scary thing is that this fellow went on to become a Presbyterian pastor in this country (*he may have grown out of it by now, and/or left the USA; I don't know*). But I digress.

I would venture to say none of us here have really ever heard the audible voice of God. I would also venture to say some of us here may envy those men and women of the Bible who did hear God's audible voice; in fact, you may have even asked, "*Why doesn't God speak like that to me?*" I would say two things: First, be careful what you ask for. I mean, just ask those twisted oak trees and splintered cedars in Lebanon ... in Scripture, people who heard God's voice often fell on their faces and covered their ears and heads in fear! And second, hearing God's audible voice just wasn't all that common of an experience, even in the Bible. Don't forget that centuries of history are compressed in this collection of books and letters we call the Bible. Hundreds of years take place between Abraham and David, between David and Isaiah, between Isaiah and John the Baptist. And even in the lives of the great Biblical heroes, hearing God's audible voice was a **rare** occurrence. For example, take Abraham and Moses. Twenty-five years of divine silence followed God's vocal promise to Abraham that his wife would bear a son. Twenty-five years! How well do you remember what someone said to you back in 1997? The next time Abraham heard God's voice, God called him to a hard test of faith by telling Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice (*Genesis 22*). Abraham probably wished God had kept His divine mouth shut! Moses, the man who conversed with God ... remember how long he hid as a fugitive in the desert before he heard God speak out of the burning bush? Forty years ... forty years of nothing but silence from God. At times, *generations* would pass; there would be decades and even centuries of apparent divine silence. In fact, five long, silent centuries divide the Old and New Testaments. It is a rare event, from the Biblical perspective, for God to speak audibly, directly, to His people. So when it DOES happen, it is worth noting!

In the Gospels, the audible voice of God is heard only three times. Two of those occasions God speaks from heaven and affirms, "**THIS IS MY SON.**" It's as if God were saying on these two occasions, "*Now hear this. This is so important, if you get nothing else right, get this straight from MY mouth: THIS IS MY SON.*" The first occasion is here at Jesus' baptism, His public ordination: "*This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.*" The other time is at the Mount of Transfiguration. God speaks from heaven to Peter, James and John: "*This is my beloved Son, Listen to Him!*" By the way, that pretty much sums up all the Gospel imperatives: "**Be in Christ,**" and "**Listen to Him!**" In a nutshell, the Gospel message is twofold: (1) Be in relation to Jesus Christ, make certain you are "in Him" and He is "in you;" and (2) listen to Him; do as He says. .

When God speaks, especially as it is such a rarity, we can assume He chooses His words very, very carefully. Besides echoing/fulfilling the words of the prophecy from Isaiah 42:1, God is asserting for all those within earshot: "*This is My beloved Son. I am pleased IN Him. In fact, it is only in Him I am pleased!*" Inferred is that outside of Jesus Christ, God is not pleased. If we would seek God's favor, if we would seek His pleasure, we must be in Christ ... merged with Him, united with Him, committed to Him, listening to Him, so identified with Him that we bear His family name ... all of which is symbolized in Baptism. (*"Amen?" "I'M IN!"*) Baptism reminds us we belong to the Holy One of Israel, Who created us, saves us, cleanses us, calls us by name, adopts as daughters and sons who bear His name and are called to His service, commissioned to be co-workers with His Son, in Whom He is well pleased. Amen.

REAFFIRMATION OF THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT

Here in His baptism (*or, His ordination*) Jesus is publicly accepting His calling and equipping and commissioning as God's Son and all that entails; He is publicly (*and willingly*) commencing His ministry, which in three short years will result in His brutal death. Whether you've realized it or not, we who are baptized in Christ are also accepting the same commission, to live and serve as God's sons, God's daughters. embracing our calling, our commission and our equipping which that identity entails. We are about to observe a Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant, something we started doing thirteen years ago. It's good to remind ourselves who we are, who we've been called to be, and what we have pledged to be about, which is why I love to do this Reaffirmation of Baptismal Covenant on this day we commemorate our Lord's baptism at the beginning of each year ... reminding ourselves that each and every one of us are called and commissioned in our baptisms to renounce evil, to renounce sin, to turn to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and be His faithful disciples, showing His love and obeying his word to our life's end. That's the calling we embrace in our baptisms..

REAFFIRMATION OF THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT AND AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Do we renounce the forces of evil, and all their powers in the world, which defy God's righteousness and love?

WE RENOUNCE THEM.

Do we renounce the ways of sin that threaten to separate us from the love of God?

WE RENOUNCE THEM.

Do we turn to Jesus Christ and confess Him anew as our risen Lord and Savior?

WE DO.

Do we intend to be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying His word, and showing His love, to our life's end?

WE DO.

Let us, then, affirm what we believe:

I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH,
AND IN JESUS CHRIST HIS ONLY SON OUR LORD;
WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY GHOST, BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY,
SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED, DEAD, AND BURIED.
HE DESCENDED INTO HELL.

THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD; HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN, AND
SITTETH ON THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY;
FROM THENCE HE SHALL COME TO JUDGE THE QUICK AND THE DEAD.

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY GHOST, THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH,
THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS;
THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY, AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING. AMEN.

STANZAS 5 AND 6 OF "BAPTIZED INTO YOUR NAME MOST HOLY"

Yes, all I am and love most dearly I offer now, O Lord, to You.
Oh, let me take my vows sincerely, and what I say, help me to do
Let naught within me, naught I own, serve any will but Yours alone
And never let my purpose falter, O Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
But keep me faithful to Your altar, 'til You shall call me from my post.
So unto You I live and die and praise You evermore on high.



THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

The Gospel accounts assert that the baptism of John was for sinners. However, a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith is that Jesus was not a sinner. John's baptism represented repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Being without sin, Jesus could neither repent nor receive forgiveness of sins. The baptism of John was also to "prepare the way for the Lord." However, Jesus did not need preparation for receiving Himself.

So why was Jesus baptized? The unwillingness of John the Baptist to baptize Jesus (as recorded by Matthew) indicates he was puzzled by this as well. Jesus replied to John's protest by saying, "Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. What does Jesus' somewhat cryptic answer mean? One possible explanation follows:

Deuteronomy 6:25 tells us that "righteousness" involves obedience to the law of God. What Jesus seems to be saying is that He was submitting to baptism in order to obey the Old Testament law. Christ underwent the law of circumcision (Lev. 12:3 and Luke 2:21). He was presented in the temple (Luke 2:22-23); He went to the Passover (Exodus 34:23 and Luke 2:42); He observed the Jewish feasts commanded by the law (Mark 14:12, Luke 22:3, John 17:10); but what law was He obeying at His baptism?

Some scholars believe the Old Testament law Jesus was obeying by His baptism is found in Numbers 8:6-7. "Take the Levites ... and cleanse them. Thus shall you do to them to cleanse them: sprinkle water ... upon them." Who were the Levites? They were the priests in the Old Testament. The New Testament asserts that Jesus was (and is!) a priest; in fact, He is the ultimate High Priest for all time (Heb. 3:1, 4:14, 5:5, 9:11). It is quite possible that Jesus' baptism was the ceremonially prescribed act of His ordination to the high priesthood.

Although John didn't fully understand it at the time, it seems he administered to Jesus the sacramental rite that would formally set Him apart as a priest and a minister of holy things. According to the Law, three things were required before any man could become a priest: **First**, he must be thirty years of age (Numbers 4:3, 47; Luke 3:23 explicitly makes the point that Jesus was thirty years old at His baptism). **Second**, he must be sprinkled with water by one already a priest (John qualified as a priest, inheriting the office from his father Zechariah, Ex. 29:9; Num. 25:13; Luke 1:5, 13). **Third**, he must be called of God as was Aaron, the first high priest (Ex. 28:1, Heb. 5:4-10).

Jesus knew His calling. He waited until He was thirty years of age and then came to John to "fulfill all righteousness," that is, to meet the last demand of the Old Testament law for a priest before He began his public ministry. Just in case there was any question, God emphatically and vocally reiterates Christ's call to the highest priesthood so that all present might hear. "This is My beloved Son, in Him I am well pleased."