

Sermon, Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Mark 1:4-11 1/7/2024  
*(Elizabeth Felicetti)*

If it feels like we just had this same reading, that's because we did, four weeks ago on the second Sunday of Advent. But we started and stopped at different places then, starting with the first verse of Mark and ending at verse 8, whereas this morning we start with John the baptizer and a voice from heaven. Then in six weeks we'll hear this Gospel of Mark story of Jesus' baptism again in the first Sunday in Lent. These repetitions happens when we spend the church year in Mark, because his Gospel is so short.

We hear the voice of God in several of our readings this morning. In Genesis, God said, "let there be light," and God called the light day and the darkness night. One commentator described God as a poet in this creation story, speaking things into being. I find the rhythm of this opening of Genesis comforting, especially the part "and there was evening, and there was morning, the first day." The story goes on to tell us evening and morning of the subsequent days, God speaking more things into being before resting.

In Mark, God says to Jesus as he comes up out of the waters of baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." I'm glad Jesus had this brief interlude of love because in the very next verse the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness for his forty days of temptation. But we don't have to talk about that part until Lent in six weeks. For now, we are in a season of signs and wonders, so we can bask in Jesus being beloved during baptism.

So we hear the voice of the Lord as a poet speaking light into being this morning as well as the voice of the Lord as a loving father; but then in this morning's psalm, the voice of the Lord is a lot louder and flashier: thundering, breaking cedars, splitting flames of fire, stripping forests bare.

Have you encountered the voice of God in similar ways to these three readings?

I'm attracted to the voice of God that shows up seven times in the psalm. That voice is tempestuous and direct, and certainly terrifying. But when my dog is shaking during a thunderstorm or I see a tree knocked over, I don't think of the voice of God. Our church here was struck by lightning once about twelve years ago and I did not interpret that as a sign from God that we were doing something wrong. (And if any of you interpreted it that way, then I wonder why you're still here.) Sometimes I wish God communicated with me so loudly, but discerning how to hear God's voice is harder for me. I know it is for many of you as well.

I wonder about the voice of God from the heavens in today's Gospel reading. In Mark, this voice is a little different than the same passage in Matthew which we heard last year. In that passage, the voice from heaven says "This is my Son, the Beloved." That sounds to me like God was talking to all of those who are present. But when the words are "You are my Son," then I wonder, could others hear this voice of God, or was it just Jesus who heard? Could John hear?

If we remember that later on in John's life, when he was in prison, he had some doubts, then maybe we would assume that he did not hear God's voice that day when John baptized Jesus. But I think we can have a monumental religious experience, like hearing the voice of God directly,

and still have our faith challenged at a later time. We all have lives filled with challenges. Don't believe social media posts that show people looking deliriously happy all the time: we have all been through some stuff, and the longer I serve here, the more I learn about challenges in your lives, as well as experience challenges myself.

I wish I heard God in thunder and I wish God would tear open the heavens from time to time in the form of a dove and speak clearly to me, but I think I hear the voice of God most often in the form of the Genesis reading. God said "Let there be light." I hear that in my head most mornings when I'm walking in the dark and start seeing the stars disappear and bits of light come up, sometimes in vivid colors. I take pictures but they never, ever look half as beautiful as the light itself, and I try to avoid the temptation of capturing the moment and instead just try to appreciate it, and listen to God's voice as the day dawns, and remember that God saw that the light was good. Which is not to say that darkness is not good: many important and generative things happen in the dark.

Yesterday was Epiphany, and we will be in the season of Epiphany until Ash Wednesday. During this time, when it can be bleak and gray outside, we are invited to be alert for stars and light and signs and wonders. For glimmers of voice of God. Where do you hear God? In the voices of people singing around you? In the sunrise? In a thunderstorm? Where will you seek signs and wonders, and how will you live out your own baptismal vows in this season?