

Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord Matthew 3:13-17 St. David's (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Christmas is really over now: all twelve days are gone. So here we are at the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, seeing John baptizing Jesus, even though, as John points out, it would be more appropriate for Jesus to baptize John. As Jesus comes up from the water the Spirit of God descends like a dove and a voice says "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

That seems to be a theme of today's readings: God's voice. We hear God's voice proclaiming Jesus to be the beloved pleasing son.

And we hear about God's voice over and over in this morning's psalm, which is always the psalm on the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus. The psalm mentions the voice of the Lord seven different times:

The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;
 The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice;
 the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.
 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees;
 The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire;
 the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
 The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe and strips the forests bare.

I'm struck by all of the nature associated with God's voice. We baptize a little differently here at St. David's than John the Baptist did. John was in the River Jordan, dunking people completely. Imagine the darling baptism outfits we see some of the babies we've baptized here wearing. Imagine how they would look completely immersed in a river. I bet they wouldn't hold up as well.

I've only baptized someone outdoors once, and it was a baby at Camp Chanco. I really wanted to baptize her in the James River, so it would as authentic like John the Baptist, but alas, the mom declined. Instead we brought a font with us and I don't think we even used water from the James. I think it came out of a faucet.

But it was outside. Baptisms are my absolute favorite thing, but they are different inside, aren't they? They are beautiful here in this space. I love the baptism banner that we put out. I love that even though our church is only 55 years old we have a font from the *nineteenth* century. I love wearing the white chasuble that Vee made. I love everything about baptisms here in St. David's.

I love that our windows open out not just to Reams Road and a parking lot but to trees and the memorial garden, because then sometimes we catch curated glimpses of God's creation, like birds and butterflies and blooms of different kinds. While I love baptisms in this sacred space, I also love envisioning outdoor baptisms set among God's creation.

I love picturing Jesus coming up out of the water, blinking water out of his eyes, taking a deep breath. And as he heard that voice from heaven, I wonder if he recalled Psalm 29 and the voice of the Lord upon the waters. The powerful voice. The voice of splendor.

Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry. What do you think his life was like before that? Do you think hearing the voice of the Lord was normal for him?

Is it normal for you?

Many scholars believe that Psalm 29 was an old Canaanite hymn to the god Baal, a storm god, that was appropriated to be about our God. Breaking trees and making them writhe, as well as words about fire, sound like thunder and storms as might befit a storm god. What matters to me now, however, is how ancients heard the voice of God and how we hear it today.

The seven ways that the psalm talks about the voice of God evoke different senses, like hearing, because the powerful voice breaks trees. I hear that as crackling thunder and understand why thousands of years ago storms had to have been especially terrifying, as they didn't have earth science class explaining what was happening. I still get nervous during strong thunderstorms since a tree fell on our house a few years back during a storm. Have you ever heard an enormous tree break? If you have, you don't forget that sound.

I also felt our house shake when the tree hit it, which makes me think of the voice of the Lord shaking the wilderness. The voice of the Lord is powerful. Baptism is power, not just a cake and photo opportunity, although I love the cakes we procure here when we have baptisms.

When have you heard the voice of the Lord? Sometimes I have felt the voice of the Lord breaking in at a time when I did not expect it, but in retrospect, I can see that I was preparing the way. Like John was preparing the way for Jesus.

The voice of the Lord did not come out of nowhere in today's reading. Jesus had been preparing for this his whole life: in fact, the preparation started before he was born, when the angel Gabriel appeared to his mother Mary.

If we hope to hear God's voice, we need to prepare. Maybe it seems like we in the room today are the last people who need to hear this message since we are here in church, but even when we are trying to do everything right, it can be challenging to hear God's voice.

I am experiencing that right now as I continue to live with uncertainty. As I believe you all know, I appear to be experiencing a cancer recurrence which may result in needing to have the rest of my left lung removed. The original CT scan showing a problem was back in October, so I've been living with uncertainty for a while, as I still don't know if my next step is surgery or medication or more waiting. I assume I will need some time off for healing. And then once treatment ends, will I be able to continue working with one lung? All of these questions affect our beloved church. What is next for you, when I am gone, whether that's for a couple weeks or months or potentially for good?

After Christ's baptism, he went into the wilderness. I believe we are at a point in our ministry together where we are facing a wilderness. What's next?

It helps me to remember that while Christ fasted in the wilderness, which weakened him physically, and he encountered Satan, he also learned so much about himself and his call during that time, and that he went on from the wilderness to a world-changing ministry.

We are listening for God's voice right now among uncertainty, and we are probably going to have to spend some time in the wilderness, but we will emerge strengthened for whatever is ahead.