

VOCAL CONFIRMATION
Sermon, January 9, 2011
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Matthew 3:13-17

John the Baptist appeared in the Judean wilderness proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." As people responded, confessing their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan. On this particular 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*). After all, his was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; Jesus had no need for this. So John protests, "I need to be baptized by you, [why] do you come to me?" Jesus counters John's resistance with, "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

Jesus is not coming to have His past washed away; rather, He is stepping up to embrace His future, accepting His commission as God's Son. 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 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.

This imagery of water washing out the old and washing in the new has a rich Biblical tradition. The baptismal waters call to mind the purifying flood of Noah's time, God's cleansing judgment on sin and corruption; the water of baptism is a symbol of how sin and corruption is washed away for us in Jesus Christ. Like the ark that carried Noah and his family to safety and a fresh start on dry land, the church is the God given refuge given to bear those on board safely through the troubled waters and to give us a fresh start in a new world. The baptismal waters also call to mind the Red Sea waters that saved the people of Israel. The Israelites passing through the waters of the Red Sea were leaving behind the slavery of Egypt for a fresh start in the land of promise. In Baptism we, too, pass through the waters to leave the past and its various forms of slavery behind, pressing forward to a fresh start in the land of promise the gospel proclaims to us as the kingdom of God. Incidentally, as a bit of an aside ... in the perennial debate regarding the mode of baptism (*immersion or sprinkling*) note just who is being immersed and who is being sprinkled in these Old Testament accounts. The soldiers of Pharaoh were the ones who were immersed; those being saved may have been sprinkled with some Red Sea spray, but they were kept relatively dry. The flood which took care of the Egyptian army did not overcome the Israelites. Also, it was not those on board the ark who were immersed; they may have been sprinkled with a few raindrops, but those being saved were not drowned by the waters of judgement. Like Noah, like the Israelites, we are promised that though floods may rise in life the waters will not overwhelm us; the sprinkled waters of baptism serve in part as a sacramental reminder of the judgment we are escaping through the grace of God. Baptism reminds us that we, like Jesus, belong to God, the Holy One of Israel, Who is saving us. This is also the God Who created us, cleanses us, calls us by name, and adopts as daughters and sons who bear His name and are called and equipped to His service. Hold that thought.

"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 we read in our call to worship this morning. Psalm 29 also tells us "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 in the wind 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 that they heard the voice of God and lived!*"

I've been in ministry long enough to say with confidence I'm dubious at best when I hear someone say, "God spoke to me." I agree with the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, who 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 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 and he heard God's voice say, "Here is Ann." And, apparently, God had 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 same fellow heard

from God again. He started asking to borrow large sums of money from people, and one of Ann's more gullible co-workers loaned him \$5,000. When we asked him, "Why?" the colleague replied this Aussie told him God had spoken to him, letting him know 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, um, delusional. As you might imagine, it was a bit of a scary time for Ann. But the really scary thing is that this fellow is now a pastor ... in our denomination ... in this country. But I digress.

I would venture to say none of us here have 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 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 1986? 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. 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, this audible voice of God direct from heaven is heard only three times; *two* of those occasions God speaks and says, "This is my Son." It's as if God were providing a vocal confirmation for all to hear, saying, "Now hear this. This is so important, if you get nothing else straight, get this: THIS IS MY SON." Here at Jesus' baptism; God says, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased."

When God speaks, especially as it is such a rarity, we can assume He chooses His words very, very carefully. The Greek word here is not "with", as (mis)translated in our pew Bibles. The Greek word is "in." God is saying: **In** Whom I am well pleased." The King James Version and the New American Standard accurately translate this. God is saying so much more than, "That's my boy! I'm pleased with Him." I might say that about my son, and I do, but God is saying so, so much more. 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, so identified with Him that we bear His family name ... all of which is symbolized in Baptism. Some Christians are accustomed to talking about Jesus being "in us", almost as if Jesus were someone we could own. But the Bible doesn't speak about Jesus as someone we own; rather, it describes Jesus as One who owns *us*. Baptism reminds us we belong to Him, 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.

As you see on the insert, in a moment we will have a Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant, where each of us will be invited to renew the promises of our baptisms. For some of you, renewing these promises will simply be a stating of the obvious, rather like a couple who has been married for fifty years renewing their vows. For others of you, this will be a time of reconsideration, a reassessment, maybe even a repentance of how you have been living into your baptism. And there may be some here for whom this will be the first time you have thought about any sort of commitment. Prior to my asking you to stand, we will have a time of silent reflection and prayer. Take time to review the insert, and if you are prepared to recite these words in good faith, I will ask you to do something.

In your pews you will find small cups we normally use for another Sacrament. The water in these cups is from the Jordan River, at the traditional site believed to be where Jesus was baptized. We don't hold this to be some special, sacramental, "holy" water; but it may add a richer meaning for you knowing its source. If you are ready to reaffirm your baptismal promises, then I invite you in these moments of silence to dip your finger in the water as a way of remembering your own baptism, and place a dab of the water on your forehead, or perhaps touch your heart. You may want to touch both. And if you are really bold, you may even want to follow the touch of your forehead and heart with a touch to each shoulder, making the ancient sign of the cross (*don't worry, Protestants can do that*). So, we will now have a time of silent meditation and prayer; after a few moments, I will invite you to reaffirm the baptismal covenant.

REAFFIRMATION OF THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT AND AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Do we renounce evil, and its powers in the world, which defies God's righteousness and love?

WE RENOUNCE THEM.

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

WE RENOUNCE THEM.

Do we turn to Jesus Christ and confess Him 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.

Let us sing stanzas 5 and 6 of "Baptized into Your Name Most Holy:"

- (5) 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
- (6) 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.