

PRONOUNCING GOD

To live a life of listening for the voice of God
Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Have you ever said to yourself,
“Oh, if I could only hear God’s voice . . .
then I’d know what to do—
where I should go to school,
what I should major in,
what job I should take,
who I should to marry,
where I should move,
what I should do about this particular problem I have.”
“If *only* God would tell me out loud.”

Many of us have a longing for more than
just a general belief that God exists,
or a vague sense that God is somehow present.
We want God to speak up.
We want to hear what God has to say about this or that.

Well, there’s good news today.
God has a voice.
And God uses it.
That’s what today’s worship service is all about.

The first Sunday after Epiphany, in the church year,
is called “The Baptism of our Lord” Sunday.
The assigned Gospel reading is always about
Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River.
And the other three scriptures connect in some way.

I looked at all four of them together this week,
searching for a common thread,
and my first thought was “Oh! Water.”
In Genesis 1, the creation text,
the spirit of God hovered over the waters.
In Psalm 29 we heard about God’s presence
moving over the waters, over mighty waters.

In Acts 19, there was mention of John’s baptism with water.
And of course in Mark 1, Jesus himself goes down into the water
to be baptized by John.

Well, that’s all very interesting, but it seems a theme of water is . . .
well . . . shallow.
There’s a much deeper connection here.
Turns out there’s a major character that appears
in all four of these texts.
That character is the “voice of God”—
a powerful, audible reality, that comes from the mouth of God.
The Voice.

With the mouth, God pronounces things.
In the Creation story,
God pronounces things into existence,
“Let there be . . .”
And . . . they become.
And God pronounces these things “good . . . *very good.*”
In Psalm 29, God pronounces, and things happen.
The voice of God goes out, and the earth trembles.
Earlier, we put God’s voice into powerful sound effects.
In Acts 19, when the Holy Spirit came down on the new believers,
God’s voice was translated into human voice.
Those who were overcome with God’s presence
“spoke in tongues and prophesied.”
And the heart of today’s scripture, Jesus’ baptism story,
features as its climax, the voice of God from heaven,
pronounced upon Jesus,
“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

God is a pronouncing God.
God’s words do *not* stay shrouded in secrecy.
God speaks.
God declares.
God pronounces.
A pronouncement is an authoritative word.

A week ago Saturday I officiated at a wedding in Florida.

At one point in the ceremony,
I took the authority that was given to me,
and pronounced the couple to be husband and wife.
They seemed to take my words seriously,
and so did everyone else.
Because after I spoke the words,
everyone actually believed
they were truly husband and wife.

Pronouncing can be a powerful thing.
Pronouncing can impart life.
Pronouncing can also be violent, even kill.

But we have the assurance in scripture that
the God who creates and sustains life,
the God who works for our good,
is a pronouncing God.
This is a God who does *not* keep silent,
but declares what is, and what has been, and what will be.

Most of the time,
when we find ourselves wishing that God would speak,
we're not really looking for a God that pronounces.
We're looking for a God who points his finger.
Says, "Go here. Go there.
Work at this. Study that.
Marry her. Hire him."
We're looking for a God who says,
"You should" and "you ought,"
But instead, we have a God who says,
"You are."
A pronouncing God.

Did you notice the language that came from heaven at Jesus' baptism?
If Jesus' baptism was his ordination for ministry—
that's how we usually refer to it—
sure would have been helpful for the voice from heaven
to give Jesus some clear instructions for his work.

Go preach in Galilee.
Heal the sick in Bethsaida.
Cast out demons in Capernaum.
Argue with the Pharisees in Jerusalem.
Nope.
Not instructions. Not shoulds and oughts.
But a pronouncement.
"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."
Not words of duty, but words of identity: "You are."

In his baptism,
Jesus came to understand, in a deeper way than before,
who he was, and who he was called to be, and to become.
He was not given a to-do list, he was given a name.
His ministry happened
because he accepted that name as his true identity.
He did not allow anything else to rob him of that identity.
He did not let anyone redefine him into someone he was not.

If only we *all* had that kind of clarity.
If only we were not so confused about our true identity.
If only we were not so swayed by a culture that tells us lies like,
you are what you own, or
you are what you drive, or
you are what you eat, or
you are what you wear, or
you are what you look like.
And we believe those lies,
and make decisions based on those lies,
more than any of us want to admit.

The reason we flounder so much about what we're supposed to do,
is that we're not so clear about who we are.

There's a reason why we're all the time
wishing for some clear word from the skies
about where we are supposed to go
and what we are supposed to do.
It's because we're not clear and at peace

about who we are.

In our society there is a severe shortage
of people who know and embrace who they truly are.
There is a shortage of people who believe they are called
by someone greater than themselves,
and are secure in that calling.
Oh, people in our society *talk* a lot about a person's calling.
But what they usually *mean*, is what that person is good at.
If someone is passionate about something, and excels in it,
we say they have found their calling.

But for a follower of Jesus, for a person of faith,
a true calling begins by hearing a voice that is *not* our own.
It is *not* a voice that originates in our head,
or in our heart, or in our gut.
It is the voice of the only One who has the right to call us,
and to name us.
The one who gave us life itself.
Jesus' baptism brought clarity about who was calling him.
It brought clarity about who he was
in *relation* to the one who was calling:
"You are *my* Son. I love you. I'm proud of you."
Hearing and embracing our calling
is less about deciding what to do,
and more about discovering who we are,
who we belong to.

It's *not* that our doing doesn't matter.
Of course not. It matters a lot.
It's just not the place we start.

We start by listening to our pronouncing God.
We start by believing God's pronouncement.
The way young couples really believe me
when I tell them they are husband and wife.
We start by believing God, when God says,
"You are my child. I love you.
You are wonderful. I delight in you."

Then when we have that clarity,
when we hear and accept those defining words, "You are . . ."
we then have a basis on which to act, to do, to behave.
We then have a good grounding for ethics,
for deciding between a right and wrong course for our lives.

Once we are clear that our lives belong to God and not to ourselves,
once we are clear that we are deeply loved by God who created us,
then we *know* what to do:
We do whatever reflects well on the One who gave us life.
We do what is authentic to the One we belong to.

So what becomes important
is not that we find out for sure whether God prefers us
to be a doctor or farmer or fireman,
or to live in St. Pete or St. Paul or St. Louis.

What becomes important
is that we become clear about the character of God,
the priorities of God,
the values of God,
the mission of God.

And these are things we can know.
We have ample evidence throughout the whole of scripture.
We have evidence of what God is like,
because God is such a pronouncing God.
God is vocal.
God is self-revealing.
And God spelled it out
most clearly and completely in the person of Jesus.

We *know* that God has special compassion on those who suffer.
God's heart is leaned toward the poor, the orphan, and the widow.
We *know* that God loves all that which supports life,
and hates all that which diminishes life.
We *know* that God desires restoration, reconciliation, and peace.
And abhors alienation, oppression, and war.
We *know* that God loves truth and hates deceit.
We *know* that God loves the earth he created,
and expects us to lovingly care for it.

This, and much more, we *know* about God.
Because God has declared it so.
God has pronounced it so.

So when we hear the words from God,
“You are my child and I love you,”
we also know how to conduct ourselves.
We conduct ourselves in a way that values what God values,
that honors what God honors.
We live in a way that is authentic to our identity.

When we are clear about who we are,
we are also clear about what to do.
We have such ethical confusion in our culture,
because we have such identity confusion.

We let *other* things, inferior things, determine our identity—
our possessions,
our jobs,
our money,
our personality,
our friends,
our body image.

When these false identities become the basis for life choices,
instead of the identity given us by our Creator,
then we live less than the life we were created for.
And we commit the sin of idolatry.
Because we reject God
and create our *own* self-determined identity.
And our culture rewards us for it—
because our culture *loves* self-made people.

It's *not* that God's voice is silent.
The question in whose voice am I tuning my ears to listen to?
Will I listen to the One who created me,
and the only One with the power to name me?
the one who had the power to create me?
Jesus chose to listen to that voice at his baptism.

Which voice will I choose?

The voice of our Creator speaks love,
speaks full acceptance of us, *as we are*,
and in so doing calls us toward something even greater.
God has a stake in both who we are,
and who we will be become.
Because God's identifying seal has been placed on our lives.
“You are *my* child. I love you.”

The only valid response to that voice,
is captured in three short lines by the songwriter John Bell.

*Take, O take me as I am,
summon out what I shall be,
set your seal upon my heart and live in me.*

In a prayerful spirit of gratitude,
of yieldedness,
let us sing those words together,
#81 in Sing the Journey.

—Phil Kniss, January 11, 2009