

Title: The Voice of the Lord

Date: 1/7/2023 (Epiphany 1, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10 am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Genesis 1:1-5](#); [Acts 19:1-7](#); [Mark 1:4-11](#); [Psalm 29](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Epiphany-1-The-Voice-of-the-Lord-e2e4ctq>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/wLDJRCjAoFU?t=1607>

The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders;
the LORD is upon the mighty waters.
The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice;
the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor (Psalm 29:3-4).
Amen.

Think about the first time you heard the voice of God.

Think about the last time you heard the voice of God.

What did God say? What did God sound like?

Perhaps those words broke open something within you.
Perhaps those words brought you so much joy that you skipped like a calf.

When God speaks, things happen.

In the opening verses of Genesis, God said, "Let there be light;"
and out of the formless void and the darkness that covered the deep, right beside
the wind from God that swept over the face of the waters,
there was light.

And God saw that the light was good.

Before God did anything with the light, before the light had a chance to affect anything
around it, God saw that the light was good.

God saw that the light was good, even before God separated the light from the darkness.

God repeated this pattern on the third day, and the fourth, and the fifth. Every day, God
looked upon all those objects and creatures and saw that they were good. And on the
sixth day, God went even further. "God saw all that [God] had made, and it was very
good," (Gen 1:31) humankind included.

Again, before God did anything with these objects and creatures, before these objects
and creatures had a chance to affect anything around it, God called it all "very good."

Now, the cynical part of me would say that when it comes to humans, perhaps God could only call us good at the very beginning; it all went downhill after that.

The hopeful part of me would say that this means that, at our core, we *are* very good. Maybe we're not 100% good; after all, God didn't say that we are perfectly good. Maybe that percentage of good and not-good shifts over time; as my chaplaincy supervisor reminded me, "Our best looks different every day." But knowing, BELIEVING, that we start "good" can make a big difference down the road.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho wrote a book with this very title, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference*.

He is no stranger to the kinds of violence and abuse that one human being can inflict on another, that one group of humans can commit against another. After all, he served as the chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and he's been on missions to places such as Sudan, Gaza, and Northern Ireland. Mpho has worked with rape survivors and women and families affected by domestic violence and substance abuse from South Africa to America.

Yet, even after seeing and experiencing how brutal and terrible human beings can be, they still believe that humans are fundamentally good because we are made in the very image and likeness of God. If we don't know what it means, if we forget, if we don't believe it, it is "as though we want to be dwarfs when God wants us to be giants¹."

They write, "Goodness changes the way we see the world, the way we see others, and most importantly, the way we see ourselves...If we believe that we are fundamentally cruel and selfish, we act accordingly...[When] we recognize our fundamental goodness, we act differently. And we feel different. We are happier, healthier...When we attend to our deepest yearnings, our very nature, our life changes forever, and person by person, so does our world."²

When there are so many terrible things happening to people around the world, in our country, our state, and our cities and towns, it's easier to spot the dwarfs and lose sight of the giants. There just seems to be more of them.

At the same time, it's easier to settle for being a dwarf than striving to be a giant. As we experienced during COVID and other times of tension, there's a tendency to curl around ourselves and ours for protection. It's less scary than extending ourselves in faith and love, than taking the risk of trusting in and listening for goodness in ourselves and one another.

Yesterday, we entered the season of Epiphany. A priest shared a one-panel comic of several couples sitting at a restaurant. One person said, "These eggs are astonishing!" Another said, "It's a caffeine miracle!" A third said, "Now I understand hash browns."

The caption reads, "Breakfast at Epiphany's."³

This comic captures and communicates the nature of an epiphany. It's an aha moment, a sudden realization, an illuminating understanding. All through Advent, in the prayers of the people, we prayed for God to "tear open the heavens and come down." An epiphany is when God turns our heads and points us to something new, or to something we've known all along but have forgotten, or to something we've known in part but not yet in full. An epiphany points us to an essential truth.

And back to the comic, the epiphany that comes to us has to do with where we put ourselves. These couples are sitting at a restaurant, so their epiphanies are about eggs and coffee and hash browns. Jesus has put himself by the Jordan River, in the presence of John the Baptist.

There is a lot of debate about whether Jesus needed to be baptized, why Jesus chose to be baptized. When we read this gospel in light of the season of Epiphany, let's focus on the truths that are revealed.

Just as Jesus was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This takes place at the beginning of the gospel. Jesus hasn't done anything yet. He hasn't taught anyone. He hasn't healed anyone. He hasn't cast out any demons. Yet God already names him beloved; God is already pleased with him. Jesus didn't have to earn this love. He didn't have to prove himself worthy. All he had to do was be himself. All he had to do was show up.

Still, he had to show up. He had to join the crowds from the Judean countryside and from Jerusalem. He had to choose to go to the river and not the Temple. He had to believe that God is at work in this man dressed in camel's hair, this man who snacked on locusts and wild honey. He had to put himself in that place, to be baptized by that man. He had to put himself in a position to receive these words, to receive the Holy Spirit.

God does more than meet us halfway. God is ready to tear open the heavens and come down, to call us beloved and to delight in us. But if we choose to go in a different direction, to follow a different star, these won't be the truths we receive; these won't be our epiphanies.

So today, we show up to for the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus. As we baptize Ian and welcome him as our brother in Christ, we also put ourselves in a position to renew our baptismal covenant. First, we will reaffirm our faith in the words of the Apostle's Creed. Then we will respond to five questions by making five promises.

Through these five promises,

we connect with our goodness by continuing in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles,

we take comfort that we are not alone in falling into sin and that we can always repent and return to the Lord,

we remind ourselves that we are good enough to be the Good News of God,
and we become right with God by seeking and serving Christ in all persons and by
striving for justice and peace among all people.

We are not simply a passive recipient of the Spirit; we're not a pawn in God's grand
plans. When God speaks, things happen. Creation responds. Creatures respond. We
respond.

I wish the people who designed the lectionary included the next two verses of the gospel
in today's readings. They saved them for the first Sunday in Lent, but I think hearing
them today gives us a more complete picture of baptism.

"Then the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the
wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels
waited on him (Mk 1:12-13)."

We were made for goodness, not made for easy. Living into our goodness can be hard
and haphazard. This is the reason we are baptized into a community; this is why
baptisms are part of the Sunday service.

When we are baptized, it is a sign for us and those around us that we are formally
entering a relationship with God and God's people, that we are committing ourselves to
a relationship with God and God's people, in general and in particular. It is a sign that
we recognize the good in ourselves and in one another, that we are open to being
changed by the words of God in Holy Scripture and by the Word of God, Jesus the
Christ.

God calls us to be, to belong, and to become. Baptism is a tremendously important step,
AND it is but one stop on our spiritual journey. We keep listening, we keep asking what
keeping those five promises looks like at different ages, around different people, in a
different place. And we keep reminding ourselves and one another that God has already
told us that God loves us, God delights in us, and God has called us not just good, but
very good.

Amen.

I'm going to sit down and take ten deep breaths. In that time, ask yourselves, what is
God saying to me right now? Or where can I put myself today to better hear the voice of
God?

¹ Made for Goodness. p 14

² Made for Goodness. p 11

³ <https://www.cathtatecards.com/ranges/cartoons/breakfast-at-epiphany-greeting-card/>