

## Sermon: The Voice of the Lord

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Jan. 9, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A new pastor was making his rounds, visiting the homes of his parishioners. He stopped over a house, it was evident that someone where within, but no one answered when he knocked repeatedly. So he left his card at the door, writing on the back: 'Revelation 3:30'. The following Sunday after the service, he was surprised to find his card returned in the offering plate, written below his own writing, a reply: 'Genesis 3:10'. So he quickly opened the Bible, and thereafter broke into a fit of laughter.

Revelation 3:30 reads, "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.*" Anyone care to guess what is in Genesis 3:10? "*I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.*"

What a clever response—speaking of that parishioner. Of course, the Genesis passage is referring to the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, when they disobeyed God's command not to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge. The Scripture tells us when Adam and Eve took the fruit and ate, the eyes of both were opened, and they saw that they were naked. So when they heard the sound of the Lord God walking the the garden in the cool of the day, they hid themselves from the presence of God.

When the Lord called out to Adam, "*Where are you?*" His replied was, "*I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.*" Afraid of the voice of the Lord God? That's is the first sign of separation from God, the first sign of troubles to come, or so theologians call it—the original of sin.

Are you afraid of the voice of the Lord God? What does that voice even sound like? Is it a gentle, loving voice, a whisper that affirms, that inspires? Or is the voice of the Lord mighty and powerful, like a roaring thunder? The lectionary passages today, provide us with both. A glimpse of that thunderous voice as in Psalm 29. Also a glimpse of that gentle, loving voice, in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 3, during the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.

First, the psalmist tells us that, "*The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters*" (Psalm 29:3). This voice, or *Qol* in Hebrew evokes the creation motif, the imagery of thunder, of

mighty waters, as *'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.'* (Genesis 1:1-4)

So in response, the psalmist gives this uninhibited praise, *"The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty."* Continuing the theme of praise, this powerful voice of the Lord is capable of breaking cedars of Lebanon, making Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. Lebanon is a terrain with mighty forests north of Israel, and Sirion is another name for Mount Hermon. The picture here is that of mighty mountain forests swaying back and forth, like the leaping and jumping of young animals. This thunderous voice of the Lord also flashes forth flames of fire, it shakes the wilderness, even the wilderness of Kadesh. This majestic voice of the Lord makes oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare. So all who gather in the temple of the Lord have no choice, but to proclaim, "Glory!"

Should we then be afraid, be terrified of the voice of the Lord? Not at all! The psalmist concludes in Psalm 29, appealing to the Lord, and informing us of the true purpose of this voice, that is to give strength to the people of God, and to bless them with shalom!

I used to be afraid of the voice of my own father, when I was little back in Taiwan. He was a powerful man, in my mind—a towering presence with a booming voice. When he called my name, my heart would skip a beat, like a skipping calf. Whenever he called me by my full name. Oh boy, I knew I was in big trouble! I used to sing this silly jingle, all in Taiwanese of course. Loosely translated as, 'I ain't afraid of nothing, except the voice of my own dad'. I think my mother was very wise. She knew about my fear, and sought to change that. So whenever opportunity arose, she would insist that my father would pray out loud, for his children. I recall when my sister and I were first sent to Canada to study, at the tender age of 15 and 14 at the time, Mom insisted that Dad blessed us in prayer. I don't remember his actual words, but do remember the gentle and loving tone of his voice when he blessed us as we set to embrace a new beginning. His voice gave me strength in face of an unknown future. It somehow changed the way I perceive my own father, changed how I would relate to him subsequently.

That is how I read the passage in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 3, when Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan. Jesus was starting out in his earthly ministry, at the ripe age of 30. He came to the Jordan river, to be baptized by John.

John's baptism with water, was for the repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Judaism has long practiced ceremonial cleansing as prescribed in the Law, the Torah. By the time of Jesus, the Jewish people also had various ritual immersions, mainly the immersion of Gentiles converting to Judaism. What was different about John's baptism was that he insisted on calling on Jews, his own people, to repent and be baptized. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan. The location of Jordan is worth noting. It harkens back to the time when the Israelites were leaving the wilderness of Sinai, and entering into the promised land of Canaan, embarking on a new beginning, a new life. That was John's call, for his own people to embrace a wholesale turning to a new way of life.

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, the promised one to come, to restore Israel. John answered them by saying, in Luke 3:16, "*I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*"

Theologians have long understood that baptism by water is only the first step, as symbolic of a chain of events or sequence of concepts which are closely linked with salvation. The early church father Clement of Alexandria has this to say, "Being baptized, we are enlightened: being enlightened, we are adopted as sons; being adopted, we are made perfect; being made complete, we are made immortal."

According to Clement, washing with water cleansed us from the filth of our inequalities, resulting in the gift of grace by which the penalties of our sins are cancelled. Enlightenment refers to the opening our eyes to see the holy light that enables us to see the divine. With baptism, we are then adopted as sons and daughters into God's family, as brothers and sisters to Christ. We are then made perfect and complete, meaning the lack of nothing, for what is still lacking to anyone who has the knowledge of God? Finally, being perfect, we may be assured that God will bestow unto us that perfect grace—immortality through salvation.

All of these, are not the work of water, mighty as it was, but the work of the Spirit of God. But of course, there is also the baptism of fire. John was not clear as to what he was referring to. Fire is a primordial force that both destroys and purifies. The destructive nature of fire needs no further explanation. However, the purifying function of fire needs further exploration.

In Numbers 31:22-23, fire is an instrument of ceremonial purification, as sacrifices are typically burned. In prophetic tradition, both Isaiah and Malachi have noted that metals, gold and silver, are refined through fire, as fire burns

away the impurities, the so-called dross, so what remains will be pure and good. Therefore, fire is really representative of God's desire to destroy sin and to purify God's people.

Although to our knowledge, Jesus never refer to the baptism by fire, but he did allude to in Mark 10:38, the baptism by which he will be baptized into. The context of that passage was in reply to the request of the two disciples, James and John. They came to Jesus asking to sit on the right and on the left of Jesus in his glory. So Jesus said to them, "*You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*" The two disciples naively answer yes without knowing the full meaning, which is the coming death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism in this case represents the painful ordeal that one must endure, in order to partake in the glory to come.

But before all that, let us come back to the initial baptism of Jesus by John. As Jesus emerged from the water of Jordan, the Scripture tells us that the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" (Luke 3:22).

That voice of the Lord, I imagine, was gentle and loving, almost a whisper and could be easily missed if we are not careful. Yet that voice was, as I imagine, firm and reassuring and powerful. That voice of the Lord, is also the same voice that creates us, that gives us strength, that calls us to be children of God, that blesses us, that continues to be active in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit.

When we are baptized into Christ, baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, we are baptized also into that voice of the Lord. I can almost hear it now, "You are my daughter, you are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

**In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**