

**The First Reading is Psalm 29:1-11 ( A Psalm of David):**

- <sup>1</sup> Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- <sup>2</sup> Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;  
worship the LORD in holy splendor.
- <sup>3</sup> The voice of the LORD is over the waters;  
the God of glory thunders,  
the LORD, over mighty waters.
- <sup>4</sup> The voice of the LORD is powerful;  
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- <sup>5</sup> The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;  
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- <sup>6</sup> The Lord makes Lebanon skip like a calf,  
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- <sup>7</sup> The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- <sup>8</sup> The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;  
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- <sup>9</sup> The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,  
and strips the forest bare;  
and in his temple, all say, "Glory!"
- <sup>10</sup> The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;  
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- <sup>11</sup> May the LORD give strength to his people!  
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

**The Second Reading is Mark 1:4-11 (The Baptism of Jesus)**

- <sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of

Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."  
<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

We heard about the voice of God from the psalmist and now from Mark's Gospel. As you listened to the first reading did you get a sense that the psalmist had heard God's voice at work in his or her life? Listen again to the words the psalmist used to describe God's voice, "It thunders, breaks, skips, flashes, shakes, whirls, and strips! These action-packed words remind me of C.S. Lewis' celebrated children's book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The book tells of the adventures of four children in the magical kingdom of Narnia. Jesus is represented by the lion Aslan. When in Narnia, the children meet Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who describe the mighty lion, Aslan, to them.

Listen to their dialogue: "Is he a man?" asked Lucy, the youngest of the four children. "Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is King of the wood and the

son of the great emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don't you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great lion." "Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake" said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."

This thundering, breaking, skipping, flashing, shaking, whirling and stripping God may not feel safe at times, but God is good. God's goodness created each of us through love. God desires that we be our truest selves by claiming our belovedness. Yet, sometimes this means we need some shaking up or stripping away. As Anne Lamott said, "I do not understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." God's goodness through God's voice meets us where we are but as these action words from the psalmist suggest, God does not leave us where God finds us. God moves us, if we are willing to listen and maybe even if we are not!

People were coming from the whole Judean countryside and from Jerusalem. They were drawn to the message of John the baptizer, for he was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. If we are honest with ourselves who doesn't have sins that need to be forgiven, besides Young Sheldon from the prequel associated with the Big Bang Theory. Of course, young Sheldon need forgiveness, we all need

forgiveness. It's just that Young Sheldon doesn't realize that he needs forgiveness! Maybe we don't realize our need either. Maybe we don't realize that we have settled for less than what God intends for us. Maybe we have left undone things God has called us do. Maybe we have done things that are not becoming of who God created us to be. Sins of omission as well as commission can weigh us down like excess baggage. Maybe that is why people flocked to John the baptizer, as they wanted to lighten their load. They wanted a fresh start. They wanted a new beginning.

Jesus came to John at the Jordan. Not for repentance, but for the initiation of his ministry. In this act of solidarity with humanity, the heavens were torn open and the Spirit descended like a dove fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. Then a voice came from heaven and said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." There was no thundering, breaking, skipping, flashing, shaking, whirling and stripping word. There was a word of acknowledgement – You are my Son." There was a word of identifying his truest self, "The beloved." There was a word of encouragement and praise, "With you I am well pleased."

When is the last time you heard words of acknowledgement, a word that spoke of your truest self, a word of encouragement or praise? When is the last time you heard words that help you know that you were deeply loved?

I wonder what voices we are listening to as we gather for worship today. Do you hear the voice of God saying to you, "You are my beloved?"

I suspect many other voices, both internal and external drown out the truth that we are beloved. I suspect we believe our belovedness has to do with our productivity, abilities, physical attractiveness, intelligence, wit, accomplishments, or something else. Love in our skewed understanding has to be earned, so we struggle to comprehend that God loves even us.

Yet, knowing ourselves to be loved, gives us the courage to do more than we can imagine. As Apostle Paul once said, “If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” The conclusion according to Paul, “Nothing!” Nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Rest in this truth for your life in this moment, in this coming week, in the years ahead. God loves you. God loves us as a church. God’s love is the fuel of our lives and faith. Yet, love beckons us to something more than what is.

“You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am will pleased.” What happens next for Jesus is immediate. “The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.” The thundering, breaking, skipping, flashing, shaking, whirling and stripping voice of God drove the Beloved to the wilderness.

Could this be why we don’t claim our belovedness? If we do, then like Jesus, maybe God will call us to a place we may not want to go?

Do you see how it might be easier or at least seemingly more comfortable to listen to the internal voices within us – I’m not good enough. God can’t possibly use me. I don’t have the skills that are needed. Let me tell you the Bible is littered with

people who told God, “I’m not enough,” or “I don’t have anything to offer.”

Do you see how it might be easier to listen to the rhetoric of distrust, hate and fear spewed by the culture around us, for then we don’t have to respond to sea of need in our communities and the world.

What voices guide you day in and day out? Are they voices that focus your life inward or outward, on self or on others, on this church or the Church with a capital C? What voices guide us as a church, as just one particular mission outpost of Christ among many?

I recently read an article about the difference between churches that are thriving and churches that are not. As I reflected on that article in relationship to this sermon, it became pretty clear what voices a declining church listens to. Let me share with you the litany of voices that permeate declining churches.

**The voice of we can’t.** As leadership gathers at table and an idea is proposed, twenty reasons why it will not work are shared. We can’t do this because we don’t have enough money, we don’t have enough resources, we don’t want our church to welcome those people, we don’t want to disrupt the way we have always done things. The voice of we can’t drowns out the proposal.

**The voice of us.** The voice that focuses all decisions inward. Maintaining us the way we are takes precedence, rather than those the church is called to serve. The voice says what is most important is our own needs, comfort, and way of

doing things. This voice drowns out new voices that bring new ideas.

**The voice of preferences.** Todd didn't like the music. Allison doesn't think we offer enough depth in our bible studies. Mildred doesn't like the drums. Earl isn't happy with the children running around. If leadership gathers and conversations persistently revolve around preferences, then a church is devoted to self and will eventually find itself smaller and smaller.

**The voice of reaction.** Declining churches don't choose their agenda; their agenda is a reaction to problems. You need to fix this because it broke. You need to address this complaint and smooth out relations. You need to, you fill in the blank ... the voice of reaction drowns out the voice of charting a course for the future.

**The voice of eventually.** This voice in a church causes inaction. It is not that a church actually says it won't act, it just says it will get to it eventually or someday or when the time is right – which often means never. (for instance our undeveloped basement)

Now let me flip the script and share with you the litany of voices that permeate thriving churches:

**The voice of we can.**

**The voice of them.**

**The voice of principles.**

**The voice of proactivity.**

**The voice of now.**

Thriving churches make a way where there appears no way, trusting that God can do far more than they can ask for or

imagine. They focus on the people they are trying to reach in their community. They understand who they are and who God has called them to be and make decisions based on these principles, strategies and vision. They choose their agenda with an eye on the future, trusting that as they leap God will help them grow wings. They are willing to try, even if they fail, as you miss 100% of the shots you never take. They also stay the course, not allowing preferences to take them off mission. Thriving churches act. And they act now, for action produces traction. Action produces a future focus and thriving atmosphere.

Henry Ford has a quote that sums up the impact of the voices we listen to, for he said, “Whether you believe you can or believe you can’t, you’re right.”

The voices we listen to in our lives and in this life of this church will determine the way we walk through life together.

Will we listen to the voice of God who says, “We are the beloved”? Will we claim our belovedness, even if it thunders, breaks, skips, flashes, shakes, whirls, and strips away our excuses for not thriving individually and communally?