

"The Voice of the Lord"

Rev. Peter Bynum

January 7, 2018

- ¹ *Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*
- ² *Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.*
- ³ *The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.*
- ⁴ *The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.*
- ⁵ *The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.*
- ⁶ *He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.*
- ⁷ *The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.*
- ⁸ *The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.*
- ⁹ *The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"*
- ¹⁰ *The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.*
- ¹¹ *May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!* (Psalm 29)

It has not been that long since we were standing in the soft glow of Christmas Eve. A new year has come, and we are looking ahead in a lot of different ways. But some of those tunes, and perhaps even some of the words, are still lingering in the corners of our minds. For me, it is the quieter ones...

"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie..."

"What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?"

*"Still, still, still... The virgin's tender arms enfolding, warm and safe the child are holding.
Still, still, still..."*

These are the sounds and words of Christmas that stay with me the longest, the ones that help us greet the birth of love with quiet contemplation, gentle praise, warm gratitude, and reverent silence.

But on this Lord's Day, just two weeks removed from that gentle Christmas night, the stillness is shattered by flashing lightning, booming thunder, and exploding tree trunks. Lebanon and Sirion, the two biggest mountains in Palestine, are quaking at the power of the Lord. These mighty hills are jumping around like bucking cattle, as the mighty oaks upon them are set awirl in hurricane force winds. Forests are stripped bare as the waters of the sea foam and churn. The peace of Christmas seems to have given way to a cosmic war zone.

As this psalm makes clear, all of this tumult is caused by one thing, one dynamic force. To underscore its importance and centrality, this force is named no less than seven times. It is the voice of the Lord. God's voice is shaking the foundation of the world. Today, the meek coos and gurgles of a newborn babe in a manger are overwhelmed by the booming voice of the God who rules heaven and earth.

The radical shift is jolting to say the least. As I said on Christmas Eve, it is easy to draw near to the Christmas Jesus, probably because he comes to us in such "mean estate." The Christmas Jesus is meek and mild and distinctly *not* scary. But when God comes to us rocking the mountains, snapping trees like twigs, and flashing flames of fire, we might wonder if God is more of a danger than a comfort, more of a threat than a friend.

Unfortunately, there are those in the church who actually promote and even advocate for this scarier view of God. When Haiti was rocked by a massive earthquake in 2010, around

300,000 people were killed. At least that many were injured. About 1.5 million people were displaced by the disaster.¹ Shortly after the quake, some Christian preachers used their TV platforms to claim that God had sent it as retribution for the sins of Haiti's past.² The same thing happened in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina smashed into the Gulf Coast, killing 1,800 people, ending 400,000 jobs, destroying ten times as many homes as any other natural disaster in U.S. history had. One pastor pontificated that the storm was "the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans," that in the hurricane the voice of God was booming heavenly disapproval and exacting divine revenge upon a sinful people.³ For the record, I think that is really bad theology that both misunderstands the nature of God and contorts our vision of God's role in the world. However, these human voices still exist, and they only make it easier for us to wonder... if the voice of God really is in the thunder and the lightning... if God really is directing deadly winds and lethal floods that can hurt us and kill us and leave us homeless... are we really safe in the hands of such a God?

But if we look closely at the psalm, if we trust the Word of God to point us down right paths and lead us to good answers to tough questions like this, then we discover a very reassuring truth about this powerful and potentially destructive voice of God. Notice that verse 3 says that "*The voice of the Lord is **over** the waters.*" In the same way, verse 10 closes with the claim that "*The Lord sits enthroned **over** the flood... enthroned as king forever.*" Even though the voice of God is clearly loud enough to resonate inside the storm, its true place is above it. God's voice is over the storm... beyond the storm... greater than the storm.⁴ The divine voice was there in the beginning before the storm, it reigns amid the tumult of the storm, and it will remain just as powerful and in control long after the storm is gone. Again and again, the psalms use storm imagery, not to warn us that a powerful God is out to get us, but that we know intimately the God whose power reigns supreme in the world... that God is strong enough to subdue the chaos and hold the wildness of nature at bay.⁵ In a world where we often feel powerless against the impulses of Mother Nature, the cruelties of hostile powers, the relentlessness of illnesses that we cannot cure, and the senselessness of tragedies that we cannot seem to avoid, the psalmist assures us that our God is above it all. The voice of God is strong enough to control those things we cannot control. Our God is over all of it... above all of it... beyond all of it... greater than all of it.

Even so, there is another way that the voice of God can confound and confuse us. Sometimes, in the midst of a storm, the voice of God is exactly the thing we want to hear, but in that moment, for whatever reason, we cannot seem to hear it. I have had so many conversations with people who are struggling under the weight of the storms that life throws at us, people who want desperately to do God's will, but they just can't seem to figure out what God's will is. They want to perceive a sign, to get some clarity, to somehow hear the voice of God speak. But as hard as they are listening, they see no light in the darkness, they hear no word from the Lord. If God's voice is as strong as the psalmist says... if it rocks the world and

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/12/world/haiti-earthquake-fast-facts/index.html>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/13/pat-robertson-haiti-curse_n_422099.html, on March 1, 2010.

³ <http://thinkprogress.org/2008/04/23/hagee-katrina-mccain/>, on March 1, 2010.

⁴ <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/5921.htm>

⁵ Mays, James L. *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms*. ed., Patrick Miller and Gene M. Tucker. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006. p.45, quoted at <http://www.psalmmimmersion.com/psalm-29>

knocks down trees... if it is bold enough to be heard above the thunder and above the screams of whirling winds... then why can't we hear it?

When the prophet Elijah was at his lowest point, when he was convinced that all of creation was against him and he had not one friend in the world, the Lord knew that the prophet needed some encouragement -- a reminder that he was on the right side, that he was on the right track. "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD," the voice told Elijah, "for the LORD is about to pass by." Interestingly, Elijah then experiences the same kind of storm we find in Psalm 29. It was almost identical, with one critical exception. "There was a great wind," the scripture says, "so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD." But here was the difference: Elijah could not hear the LORD in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but Elijah could not hear the Lord in the earthquake either. After the earthquake there was a great fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after that, there was nothing. Older translations describe the sound as a "still small voice," but scholars now believe the Hebrew describes the sound of nothingness... a "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:9-12).

Whatever it was, it was enough. Whatever Elijah heard, it was enough to get Elijah to stand up, to put some clothes on and get up out of the cave he was hiding in. And once he did that, the Lord began speaking in words Elijah could understand. It was only after the storm had come and gone that the voice of God finally told Elijah exactly what he needed to do. Maybe this is why some people claim that Psalm 29 is not really about a storm at all. They say instead that what Psalm 29 is really about is "a life of trust" – trust that the voice of God is every bit as powerful as we need it to be... and trust that the voice of God really is present with us always, even when we cannot seem to hear it at all.⁶

In the 14th century, the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich became desperately ill during the time of the Great Plague. She was so sick that the priest was called to administer the last rites. Afterwards, over the course of an afternoon, Julian had a series of powerful visions. In one of these, she specifically remembers hearing the voice of God, that it was as clear as if God was hovering right above her. In that moment, Julian asked God the question she had always wanted to ask. She asked God why people had to suffer. She wanted to know why bad things happen to good people, why the storms of life can inflict so much pain. When the reply came to her, the voice had changed. It was the voice of Jesus. Notably, he did not offer the why. He did not explain why the storms exist. Jesus simply moved over the storm... above it... beyond it. "*All shall be well,*" the voice said to her. "*All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*"⁷

In Christ, the life of trust reminds us that the awesome voice that fells cedars is the same meek voice of the babe in the manger. The voice that shakes the mountains is also the still small voice that whispered to Elijah in his moment of deepest sorrow. The voice that churns the oceans is the same kind voice who came to the rescue of a tiny boat on the Sea of Galilee, commanding the waves to be still, the winds to subside, and his disciples to have faith. That voice is not the rush of impending calamity. It is not a verdict of condemnation or a roar of retribution. It is the glorious sound of a world being lovingly reshaped, reclaimed and reborn.

Above the swirling winds of your storm, the eternal voice of God whispers to you "*All shall be well. All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*"

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Richard Bruxvoort Colligan, at <http://www.psalmmimmersion.com/psalm-29>

⁷ <http://www.psalmmimmersion.com/psalm-29>; <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/julian/>