

Sermon: The Voice of God Emily Toews

As a youth, I was invited to attend the neighboring church's summer camp. Here I learned to sail-board on the still waters of Lake Muskoka and to care for and trail ride a tender and gentle horse. I learned a pile of new Christian praise songs and I tasted the best food made by the volunteer grandmas in the kitchens. But here, I also learned that hearing the voice of God was a common occurrence for those who are true followers of Jesus Christ. Interesting.

I do not know what you know about the voice of God, but I highly doubt it sounds like Morgan Freeman. There at camp I delved into a crisis of faith. How is it that I, a trying-to-be perfect biblical-law abiding-God-fearing desperate teenager could not hear God's voice? I did everything I was supposed to do! I prayed and prayed and waited and waited. I came up to the front for the alter call and had people praying over me – and still the voice of God eluded me.

I have learned, since, that the voice of God comes to our awareness in many ways and just because we don't hear the voice in the same way, by no means is the voice we do hear invalid.

However, and I'm only going to mention this once, there are many voices out there – some of which claim to be the voice of God – but are the voices of the false gods of greed, entitlement and selfishness – ones that promote fear instead of peace. It is always best to discern whether you have heard the voice of God with community – and as it aligns with scripture.

That said, our scripture is full of examples of people hearing God's voice in many different ways.

The voice of God is heard through our senses – in nature and creation around us. In Psalm 29:3-9 the writer reminds us that the voice of God is thundering, storming, crashing flooding and burning through the earth.

³The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.

⁴The voice of the Lord is powerful;

⁵The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;

⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.

⁸The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;

⁹The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;

I think of a Red hot angry God – whose judgments are fierce – whose power is unforgivably vast – who causes islands to fall under the weight of lava and ash.

The Psalm, with its repetition of "The voice of the Lord...the voice of the Lord...the voice of the Lord," is relentlessly driving home the awesome power and terrible majesty of that voice and of its owner. There is nothing else that compares to God's voice.

The voice that strips the cedars and the forests also strips away all human pretensions of power, and control. The voice that flashes fire and lightning erases any notion of our own insight and understanding. The voice that shakes Lebanon, shakes all human sureties, assumptions, and plans.

We are left with no possible defense, and no possible response, except one. All we can do is say "Glory." And mean it. In fact, it is the only thing left to say after hearing this voice of the Lord.

Yet in 1 Kings 19:11-13, we read of the voice sounding much different. Elijah was commanded to ¹¹ "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

And there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD,
but the LORD was not in the wind;
and after the wind an earthquake,
but the LORD was not in the earthquake;
¹² and after the earthquake a fire,
but the LORD was not in the fire;
and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.
¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle
and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

And the voice of the LORD is heard in other ways. We read "Adam, where are you?" When God searches for Adam and Eve after they have eaten the apple of the knowledge of good and evil and are hiding from God.

We hear how Moses' whole countenance was changed after his mountain top experience with God.

And what about that passage in Samuel – where the little boy is sleeping, and God calls Samuel – and Samuel doesn't know that it is God calling until Eli suspects it's God and instructs Samuel the proper way to respond. Samuel does this the next time he's called and receives a message of judgment on Eli and his sons.

And we don't even know how God spoke to the major and minor prophets. Prophets like Jonah and Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel – the ones compelled to go to their government leaders – and/or their religious leaders and proclaim, "Thus says the Lord..." Usually their prophesies are a reminder that the people are finite, and God is infinite.

These prophets had no choice (not even poor Jonah who got really angry) their mouths were the conduits of God's voice; the words of God just flowed right through them.

And today in our scripture in Mark, we hear God's voice speaking to Jesus – at the pivotal beginning of his ministry.

Here's Mark 1:9-11 – read from the nrsv

“1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

1:10 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.

1:11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased."

It seems that the voice of the Lord can make you or break you. I'm not even sure if I would like to hear the voice of God claiming me. It seems a bit frightening. And who wants the responsibility of being an advocate for this impossible unpredictable judging, loving, tenderly caring, universe creating earth shattering whispering God?

As Christians we believe that Jesus is the son of God. That Jesus Christ is God incarnate (God in the flesh). How did Jesus cope? How did Jesus hold it all the contrasting elements of God together within him? – and not go crazy.

And what was his voice like? Did he shake mountains and cause floods to rise and destroy all the evil religious and political leaders – all the bullies all the oppressors?

We know Jesus used God's voice of judgement and Jesus used God's voice of compassion. His voice raised the dead, his voice cured this sick and destitute. His voice calmed the storms, and his voice forgave sins. His voice welcomed children and his voice chastised the money lenders and squanderers in the temple. His voice said, "I pray to the Father for you." And his voice said "my peace I leave with you...My peace I give to you – not as the world gives..." and his risen voice was the most beautiful the disciples had ever heard.

Only when we face our minuteness can we truly say we have nothing and are nothing compared to the love of God. You see, it's not the strong, the confident, the self-possessed or proud. It is, rather, the weak, the helpless, and the chastened, those who have received mercy and grace undeserved and are humbled. It is those who lay down their arms, their possessions, their pride and say, "Oh God, use me." It is these who have opened their shells to receive the Love of God.

And when we face this infinite love...when it becomes a part of who we are – then we, like Jesus, can begin to truly hear the voice of God and be filled with the Spirit.

And what does the Spirit of God speak to you?

To hear the voice of the Lord – you've got to realize that you are not God. To hear the voice of the Lord, you've got to realize that there is nothing that you can do to hide from God. To hear the voice of the God, you've got to realize that you are nothing before God – and you are everything because of God.

The voice of God is terrifying. Mountains shake – floods come, fires rage – do you hear it?

The only thing that we can be certain of – is that God – in all God's amazing wildness - loves us with a love so fierce he sent his interpreter to us. And we – if we have ears to hear and hearts ready to be judged and loved – are we ready to listen to the voice of God?