

Read Lesson: Psalm 29

Let us pray: O Lord may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Psalm 29... this is from the Hebrew hymn book.

Here's a book from the bible that existed to be sung and played and heard- not just to be read. The Psalms, all 150 of them to be exact, give us some of our most poignant and precise images of God.

Today's reading, Psalm 29, draws a particularly dramatic sketch of God. The gentle caring shepherd God of Psalm 23 is far away from Psalm 29's God of uncontrolled power and earthshaking might.

Here, Yahweh/God is likened to a thunderstorm full of sound and fury, winds and rain, jagged lightening and crashing noise.

Thunderstorms...

Remember the fear that we all have had of them and their awesome power?

One summer evening, during a particularly violent thunderstorm, A mom was tucking her small son into bed. She was about to turn off the light when he asked with a tremble in his voice,

"Mommy will you sleep with me tonight?"

The mom smiled and gave him reassuring hug.

"I can't honey, I have to sleep with Daddy"

There was a long silence that at last was broken by a shaky little voice saying:

"The big sissy."

For the people of the psalms, thunderstorms were commonly understood to be the voice of God.

In fact, a recurring theme in ancient near eastern cultures was that thunderstorms described the struggle between the God of the air (who also delivered life giving, thirst quenching rains to the earth) and the god of the seas whose raging, ceaseless waves represented chaos and uncontrollable power.

Indeed, most scholars believe that Psalm 29 was borrowed and adapted from a much older Caananite hymn describing just such a struggle.

In this Psalm, the power of the divine voice of Yahweh is awe inspiring.

The cedars of Lebanon were trees that were known for their strength, beauty and durability. Only the finest boats and structures were built from this wood. Yet these trees snap into mere kindling at the sound of God's voice. The writer even suggests that the forests burst into flame at the sound of Yahweh's voice- a reference to the lightning that accompanies great storms.

I think that it is interesting to note how this Psalm ends.

First the strength of the Lord- the power that has just been described as an out of control thunderstorm capable of breaking cedars and setting fires and shaking the earth- this power now is channeled intentionally and specifically to God's people.

And second, even with such unimaginable power accessible to God's people, the Psalmist does not boast of enemies vanquished, or intruders crushed. The glory of God's strength is the glory of what that strength is capable of producing in the hearts and lives of God's people- peace.

Faith in the strength of Yahweh/God's thunderous voice gives God's people their best hope of praying that God's blessing of peace will also be granted to them.

So let me ask you with the psalmist, are you hearing voices in your head? Hearing voices isn't a good thing in our culture. In the name of mental health, we've intentionally tuned out some of God's best built in fine tuning of the human spirit.

We are like the guy who walks into a good old Wisconsin bar, sits down and orders a drink. As he starts eating the beer nuts at the bar, he hears a voice say:

"Wow, you look great tonight!"

The man looks over at the bartender who didn't say anything, so he just keeps drinking his drink and eating his nuts, when suddenly he hears the voice again:

"That's an awesome shirt! You are fantastic!"

He looks around and sees that he is the only guy in the bar, so he asks the bartender if he just heard anything, and the bartender says:

"Was the voice saying bad things or good things?"

The man says: "Good things, why?"

The bartender says:

"It must have been the complimentary beer nuts."

The songwriter/poet in today's Psalm finds the voice of God impossible to ignore too. For this psalmist, God's voice is no small, still whisper to the soul, but a great shout that shakes the world with it's power and purpose.

The great cedars of Lebanon snap at the sound of God's voice.

The mighty waters slosh like a wading pool under the Lord's powerful directives.

Oak trees whirl at the tornado force of the divine voice.

And the vast wilderness quakes and shudders.

This is the voice of God that is outside of ourselves, outside of our souls and spirits. It's the hurricane movement of the Holy Spirit over our world... filling it, subduing it and exposing it to God's unmatched might.

The voice of the Lord transforms the face of the earth through the power of its vibrations.

Yet the psalmist doesn't conclude his song on a blustery note. Instead he turns to how the divine chooses to focus this sound and fury. Just as a parent wrestles gently with a young child, checking and containing their greater strength to keep the child safe, the psalmist prays that the Lord will channel this divine Holy Spirit power down to a manageable strength that God's people can absorb and retain and use in their lives.

That's God's gift to those who are willing to open themselves up to God's Spirit... strength and resources beyond any human capability. The presence of this divine strength within provides God's people with an even greater gift- the blessing of peace. For the psalmist, this is the final demonstration of God's all powerful voice speaking and moving in the world- genuine peace is the fruit of God's strength and presence.

Remember grade school, when it was time to watch that grainy "black and white", reel to reel movie? One popular science film that made the grade school circuit, demonstrated the principles of magnetism. I remember it to this day.

In the film, a pile of unremarkable iron filings were dumped out onto a thin metal sheet. The unseen scientists then blasted a loud tone directly over the filings. The resulting vibration caused the metal fragments to start bouncing and moving across the sheet. The frequency and duration of the sound determined what shape the filings would take.

With the first sound, the filings formed themselves into a single line. At the second blast, the seemingly alive fragments formed themselves into a beautiful snowflake. A third tone made the metal bits migrate into a star. It was like watching a kaleidoscope move, powered not by hands, but by sound alone.

I think back and remember that the lesson I got from this black and white movie was simply this: hear the voice and your life comes together. Ignore the voice and your life can fall apart or remain without purpose.

Are you hearing God's voice in your life? Is the power of God's voice vibrating in your soul? In the Psalm, the voice of God first shakes up the creation and then settles upon God's people.

So the question of the morning is:

Can you hear God's voice? Loud and earthshaking, sweet and soft, a private whisper and a public announcement?

Or have you allowed yourself to become tone deaf to the spirit of God, no matter what decibel level it takes?

Educational research from Germany confirms that we hear less than we used to be able to hear. Twenty years ago, the human ear could subtly distinguish 300,000 sounds; we are now able to distinguish just more than about 180,000, a loss of almost 50 %.

Maybe part of our 21<sup>st</sup> century tone deafness comes about because too often the church is trying to connect people to a Jesus who was alive way back when- a 1<sup>st</sup> century figure, caught up in the disputes of a 1<sup>st</sup> century world.

But the power of Jesus is eternal... that power is not bound to a certain time or place. It is as fresh and alive today as it was in first century Palestine.

It is available to us if only we open ourselves up to it's presence.

Our challenge is to open our ears, and our minds and our souls to God's spirit.

Here's the reality, folks...

The Holy Spirit of God is not a recording.

It's a continual, live broadcast to us.

It's a direct communication from the inner spirit of God to the inner spirit of the receptive, listening, attuned heart of the believer.

The Holy Spirit which Jesus called to support the church after he was gone, is real for every generation of Christians.

I read the story this week of Yousaf Karsh, a canadian portrait photographer who spent 50 years taking pictures of all the notable people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The only picture he ever took of a person's back was of Pablo Casals, in a small French abbey in 1954.

Karsh said that he was setting up his equipment when Casals started to play Bach on his cello. Karsh was so enthralled by the music that he almost forgot why he was there. In that moment, Karsh caught the image of a tiny, baldheaded man bent over his cello, frozen in time against the plain stone wall of a tiny French chapel.

When this portrait was on exhibition at the museum of Fine arts in Boston, the curator noticed another bald headed, elderly man who came, day after day to stand silently in front of it for long periods at a time. Finally, the curator tapped the old man on the shoulder and asked what he was doing.

With obvious irritation, the old man turned and said:  
"Hush, young man! Can't you see that I'm listening to the music?"

Karsh caught the image of Casals playing Bach.  
The old man heard the music in his head.

Can we hear the voice of God vibrating all around us... in nature,  
in ourselves, in others?

Is the power of God's voice turning us into divine shapes, just as  
the power of sound turned my iron filings into snowflakes and  
stars and crosses?

And finally, can others hear the voice of God by looking at how we  
live our lives?

The psalmist believed we could hear God's voice.  
2500 years later it still is true.  
God's voice can still be ringing in our ears... if we open ourselves  
up to it.

Listen for it this week and see what happens.  
Amen.

Let us Pray.