

## Hearing the Voice of God

### Psalm 29

A Season of Singing

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Sunday, January 8, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

As you may know, this past two weeks I have suffered from a second round of the most violent kind of flu that I have had in my life. I asked the doctor why this is so. He said, "Well, have you not heard of the Washington vulnerability? The bigger they are, the harder they fall." I appreciate your prayers.

We celebrate Epiphany today. That is the Sunday where we recognize that God shows up, is visible, and speaks at specific times in history. This particular psalm, number 29, is about God speaking in the midst of the storm. The Biblical metaphor for water is that these are the times of the troubles of people, and the storm is the time of terrible trouble. So the biblical metaphor for storm is that the people of God are going through a horrendous time. It is good for you to think of those times when you may be venturing into places where you would rather not go because life is painful and difficult. The waters represent the difficult transitions and troubles; the storms represent the horrendous times—the big crises.

There are all sorts of different kinds of storms, metaphorically and literally. One could easily understand that this has been a year of terrible storms. We have gone all the way to storm Zeta in terms of those storms in the Atlantic. We have experienced seismic, economic, and meteorological, ecclesiastical, and political storms—storms that are personal; storms that are global. The tsunami, an earthquake, fires in Oklahoma, Iraqi storms of political and military significance. We are in the midst of great storms.

This scripture does not say why storms happen. It does not say that God brings storms. Don't blame the storms on God. It does simply say that storms exist, and we will deal with them one way or another. However, realizing that storms happen and that there is no way to avoid them, the psalm gives a clear voice on how we should deal with the storm. God is with us in the midst of the storm, and we are defined as the people of God who know God personally.

It is a common pattern in American advertising to recognize that we go through hard times. Nationwide<sup>TM</sup> has recently run a series of ads portraying that life comes at you fast. Crises and significant storms hit you. Remember that one with M. C. Hammer saying in a dancing, rapping way, "You can't touch this." In the next scene he has lost the car, the house, the furniture, and everything in his life. Storms happen.

The perfect storm is that time in life when there is not only global crisis, but there is national and vocational crisis in your life, and you may even have a personal spiritual crisis. And you are asking God, "Why has all this happened to me?" That cluster of crises can drive us into a deep, internal spiritual storm, and that inner storm is the most difficult of all because we often do not experience God in the midst of that darkness when the clouds are covering us.

This psalm clearly affirms that God is greater than the storm. God is over the waters; God can be heard above the storm. God is more thundering and majestic than the power of the storm. God breaks the cedars, which are the strongest trees known in our universe. God can make the nations skip across the waves like boats. God is powerful—more powerful than the storm. In a tremendous example of alliteration, which I believe the writers of the New Revised Standard Version must have celebrated with great glee, the text includes the words, "the voice flashes forth flames of fire." Fire is also seen as the time of the storm. God speaks in the midst of the storms.

But it isn't just God who speaks. You'll notice that the term addressing God is "the Lord." The Lord's voice is heard. That word "Lord" is the address that the people of God give personally to the God that they know: Yahweh. This is not just any God; this is my God. My God is present in the midst of the storm. God's voice is personal, knowable, and recognizable. It is the Lord, not just any God, who speaks. The Lord will give strength to his people; the Lord will bring peace. We believe that God, the Lord, speaks to

us in the most difficult times of life. In our Reformed tradition, which we affirm today in our ordination and installation of officers, we believe that God's voice is heard in many different ways: in creation; in human history; in scripture; in Jesus, particularly, who is our Lord; in the community of the Holy Spirit where people gather to pray and receive God's word together; in the leadership communities of elders, trustees and deacons; in the Word and sacrament which we celebrate today; and in preaching. We believe that the Word is heard in these contexts. We believe the voice of the Lord can be heard, understood, and acted upon. Jesus spoke in storms. There are two examples in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus speaks in storms.

The first one is with Jesus in the middle of the boat where he is asleep. The storm is raging, and the disciples plead with Jesus to wake up. Jesus awakens and speaks to the storm: "Be at peace. Be still." Then he turns to the disciples and asks, "Why are you afraid? Do you not have any faith?" We hear the word of the Lord speak to us in our storms to affirm that Jesus is present although it may seem as if he is asleep. But Jesus is present, active, and able to speak in the midst of the storm and settle it.

In the second example, Jesus is sending his disciples alone across the Sea of Galilee. They experience winds that are flying against them and waves buffeting them to the point where they are rowing so hard that they are making no progress. And Jesus, as if humorously, walks on by them on the sea. They catch his attention and ask him to come to them. When Jesus reaches them, he says to them, in the midst of the storm, "Take heart. Don't be afraid." The voice of the Lord in the midst of the storm is consistent: "Take heart. Do not be afraid."

There are false voices that often speak on behalf of God. And we must discern the difference between God's voice and those false voices. False voices often claim authority for speaking on God's behalf, but seldom show any accountability to what scripture says. Individuals often speak loudly, often aggressively and angrily, as if they represent God. But do not believe that they are speaking on God's behalf. God often comes in the quiet, still voice, which is stronger than the storm. Individuals who claim communal authority, as if they represent the entire group of the people of God—the congregation—often speak out-of-turn, because they are not speaking God's voice; they are speaking their own voices. They may be parental figures that usurp God's voice; people whose opinions are very audible, but are not accountable. They are not speaking God's voice. People may say that God does not speak; this is not true. People may believe that the stars, somehow, speak for God; this is not true. People who say that God's voice is primarily one of judgment or condemnation are also mistaken. That is definitely not true. We must discern the difference between the voice of God and the voice of lesser gods.

How do we discern the voice of God? God speaks to create, to recreate, and not to destroy. God speaks to send, not reject. God speaks to invite, not to retreat. God speaks to liberate, not to imprison. God speaks to confront, but not to confound. God speaks to forgive, not to condemn. God speaks to reconcile, not to divide. God speaks to build up, not to tear down. The Lord speaks to bless, and not curse. The Lord speaks to strengthen, not to weaken. The Lord speaks to faith, and not fear. The Lord speaks to embrace, and not abandon. It is important that we learn to discern the differences between God's voice and other voices.

The role of leadership in the Reformed tradition is the gathering of elders, deacons and trustees. It is important, in our tradition, to realize that God does not speak through isolated individuals. We are not neo-Catholics. We do not believe that God speaks only through the person at the top, as if the senior pastor were some kind of mini-Pope. We believe that God speaks only in the community of gathered elders, deacons and trustees. We believe that it is the responsibility of leadership who gather together to listen to God, to listen to each other, to learn together, and to act together. The congregation enfranchises officers not to be isolated, lonely leaders, but to be leaders who gather consistently and together to discern the voice of God.

We are a representative government. We invite people, as a community of leaders, into communal responsibility to listen to God. Those leaders will experience difficult times to discern the voice of God. There may be great times of fire. In a recent book on leadership by Sharon Dalloz Parks, who teaches at the Harvard Divinity School, the Harvard Business School, and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, she writes that acts of leadership are tested in fire—the fire of competitive markets, the fire of the boardroom, the fire of the legislative process, the fire of office morale, the fire of public scrutiny, the

fire of organizational dysfunction, the fire of failure. Leaders learn to grow up and to prosper in the fire. Fire tempers arrogance, shatters illusions, threatens destruction, bears gifts, keeps us open to complexity, helps us deal with ambiguity and mystery, and makes us participate in the ongoing stream of life. Leadership without fire is not leadership at all.

In Rembrandt's painting, *The Storm on Galilee*, he shows Jesus in the boat with the twelve disciples, and the disciples are in absolute chaos. The storm is wreaking havoc on their boat. Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat. But in the midst of that painting, you see a lone disciple—in fact, it is a thirteenth disciple—and we ask, "Where did that person come from?" That thirteenth disciple is the disciple who is paying attention to the voice of the sleeping Lord in the back of the boat. This is where we need to be. That thirteenth disciple is kneeling before Jesus and praying, and not letting the frenetic pain of the storm destroy his understanding of the voice of God. The question for us today is: Are we the thirteenth disciple in the storm, or are we like the other twelve who are falling apart because the storm is wreaking havoc?

Dag Hammarskjöld, in his autobiographical notations called *Markings*, talked about a personal storm in his life. Very successful as an international statesman, in 1950 he began to note in his personal markings a concern about his own life. These markings were a sort of white book concerning his negotiations with himself and with God. He learned to trust God, not only in life, but also in mountain climbing where, in the middle of the crises, in the midst of the tough times, he was able to attend to the voice of God. In 1950, at the age of 45, he wrote: "Night approaches now." He was entering a very dark night of the soul when the fires and storms of his interior life were overwhelming, and he said this in his notes:

In a whirling fire of annihilation, in the storm of destruction, and the deadly cold of an active sacrifice, you would welcome death. But when it slowly grows within you day by day, you suffer anguish—anguish under the unspoken judgment, which hangs over your life while leaves fall in a fool's paradise. I don't know who or what put the question to me, but at some moment I did answer 'yes' to that question, and at that hour I was certain that an existence is meaningful and that therefore my life and self-surrender had a goal.

So Dag Hammarskjöld continued along the way and walked through the storm, the dark night of the soul. And when he went through that personal storm, he recognized, as he continued along the way, "I learned step-by-step, word-by-word, that behind every saying in the Gospel stands one man, and behind each word stands that one man on the cross."

Jesus went through the worst storm, and has shown us how to live in the midst of storms. How do you pray to hear God's voice when you are going through the hardest times of your life? You don't pray, "Make this go away, Lord. I don't want any more storms in my life." That's an unrealistic prayer. No, you pray, "Lord, help me to hear your gracious voice in the midst of the storm." Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, may we hear your gracious voice in the midst of our storms: our personal storms, our congregational storms, our city storms, our national storms, our international storms. May your Spirit speak clearly to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.