

THE VOICE OF THE LORD

Luke 3:15-22

The Baptism of Our Lord (Series C)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 3, verses 15 through 22. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 3, beginning at verse 15, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The theme of the day is the powerful voice of the LORD. Or, at least, that's one of the themes. Baptism is also an obvious theme, and we'll talk about how Baptism fits into this. But the powerful voice of the LORD is the theme that weaves through the readings of the day.

When we imagine the voice of the LORD, we might think of it as a thunderous sound or a deep bass, like in the old movie *The Ten Commandments* when God speaks to Moses from the burning bush. And it might have that deep acoustic quality to it. I would guess it probably does. When we talk about someone having a powerful voice, we usually mean that it has great volume or depth, like an opera singer, or the voice you might take with your children sometimes when you really want them to pay attention. You attempt to use a voice that commands respect. That deep voice possesses the power of persuasion.

But the voice of the LORD's power is not one of intimidating persuasion. God could sound like a squeaky chipmunk, and it would still command the same power. The voice of the LORD possesses the power to effect physical and spiritual change wherever it is spoken. It's not just the power to *persuade*; it's the power to *operate*. When God speaks, things happen. Remember how God created the universe. He said, "Let there be ...," and there was. Many times in Jesus' ministry, he simply spoke, and the physical and spiritual world responded. Demons came out of people (Luke 4:35). Sins were forgiven (Luke 5:20). Paralytics walked (Luke 5:24-25). The blind

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received sight (Luke 18:42-43). The deaf began to hear (Mark 7:34). And the dead came back to life (Mark 5:41; Luke 7:14; John 11:43-44). His voice does not merely command respect; it flat out does stuff.

The psalm for the day speaks of the power of God's voice. Notice how the voice of the LORD effects change in the physical world.

“The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over many waters.

The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

“The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

“The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

“The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, ‘Glory!’ ” (Ps. 29:3-9).

“The voice of the LORD is over the waters.” This recalls creation, where God spoke, and stuff began to be. And it continues to have this effect over creation. “The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars ... shakes the wilderness ... [and] makes the deer give birth.” It is the power of God to command change in the physical and spiritual world.

And it's not just destructive change. We certainly see the destructive force of God's voice in the Psalm, and that should cause us to fear the LORD. It thunders. It breaks cedars. It flashes forth fire. It strips the forests bare. But it also causes the deer to give birth. And he uses his powerful voice to deliver his people. The voice of the LORD is the power to kill and to make alive. So we should fear the LORD, but we should also trust in him above all things and seek salvation from him.

We see this gracious use of the LORD's voice in the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 43.

“But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine’ (Is. 43:1).

God calls his children by name, and so they are his children. When God calls you his child, and he does through Jesus Christ, you become his child. His voice has the cosmic legal authority to adopt you as his own. This is because he has redeemed you. “Redeemed” means that he has purchased you. Jesus bought you, “not with silver and gold, but with his holy and precious blood

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and with his innocent sufferings and death” (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, 2.2). He paid the price, he calls you his child, and so you are.

And the LORD speaks of how he will gather his people. He says to Israel,

“I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you.
I will say to the north, Give up,
and to the south, Do not withhold” (Is. 43:5-6a).

In the context of Isaiah, the people of Israel were being scattered. And some of them would be scattered for a very long time. But God promises to call them back to himself. And this is not just a calling to the Jews, but to all his children from many nations. He says, “Everyone who is called by my name” (43:7).

Ultimately, this speaks of death and resurrection. Unless we remain alive until Christ’s return, we will die. Our bodies will go back to the earth. The dust and bones of God’s children have been and will be scattered to all the ends of his earth. But when Jesus returns, he will say to the earth, “Bring out your dead.” He will call to the east and the west, the north and the south,

“Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of the earth” (Is. 43:6b).

With his powerful voice, the same voice that called Lazarus and others out of death, Jesus will call you out of death.

At Bible study on Wednesday night we were talking about John 10, where Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. He talks about how he knows his sheep by name, and they know his voice and follow him. Imagine that day when Jesus returns, and he calls you by name to wake you from the sleep of death. In John 5 Jesus says, “An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out” (John 5:28b-29a). The voice of the LORD is not a figure of speech. But Jesus will literally speak to you, and the power of his voice will raise you from death. It’s like when you’re a kid and your mom or dad comes and wakes you on Christmas morning. You won’t ask for five more minutes, like on a school day, but we will rise with wonder and excitement to experience the perfect and eternal salvation of God. When the LORD calls you by name, he calls you to eternal life. His voice has the power to give you that life.

The Old Testament lesson also gets us thinking about Baptism a little bit.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you’ ” (Is. 43:2).

That resonates with how John describes Jesus Baptism in the gospel lesson.

In Baptism, God has attached the power of salvation to the physical element of water. And we might ask, “How can water do such great things?” After all, it’s just water, an ordinary physical element. Should we really expect it to deliver God’s forgiveness, life, and salvation? In his *Small Catechism* Martin Luther answers,

“It is not the water, indeed, that does such great things, but the Word of God, connected with the water, and our faith which relies on that Word of God. For without the Word of God, it is simply water and no baptism. But when connected with the Word of God, it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit,

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as St. Paul says to Titus, in the third chapter: ‘He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit’” (4.3).

The power of Baptism comes from the Word of God. It comes from the powerful voice of the LORD. Jesus instituted Baptism to make disciples (Matt. 28:19). If he says it will work, it will. So it’s not just water. And it’s not any water. But it is water connected with God’s Word.

Still, we might think, *Why water?* Why not anything else? Why not sand, or milk, or grass, or air? It’s interesting to consider the way water is spoken of in the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament. The LORD drowned most of his creatures in a flood, but he saved Noah and representatives of all creatures in that same flood (Gen. 6-9). He used the Red Sea to deliver his people Israel from Egypt, but drown Pharaoh’s army (Ex. 14). The LORD demonstrated his power over the sea, that he could use it both to drown and to save, to kill and to make alive. The ancients feared the sea. It was chaotic and dangerous. But God said through Isaiah, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”

Water is all around us. It is necessary for survival. But it can also destroy. Even today, while humanity arrogantly thinks that we can tame the seas or protect ourselves from the flood, ships still sink and floods still destroy. Water has this natural power to destroy or preserve life. God uses it to kill and to make alive.

Paul speaks of this power in the epistle lesson from Romans 6.

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:3-5).

Where does the power of Baptism come from? There are really two correct answers to that question. I gave you one of them already. The power of Baptism comes from the Word of God. If Jesus had not commanded Baptism, it would do nothing. But he has commanded it, and his powerful voice bestows power in Baptism.

The second correct answer is what Paul gives us here. The power of Baptism comes from the death and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism works by uniting us with Christ in his death and resurrection. Hence the water. Water has always had the power of death and life. And God chose the water of Baptism to connect us to Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are drowned in Baptism. “The old self was crucified with [Jesus] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing” (Rom. 6:6). Having died with Christ, we are also raised with him in his resurrection.

Understanding this passage, which really just means that we accept it as true, puts to rest some of the misconceptions about Baptism. First, it’s not magic or superstition. But it actually unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection. Second, it’s not a symbol. Paul uses no symbolic language here. He uses the language of reality. Baptism does not symbolize repentance or represent our union with Christ. No, Paul is very clear that it buries us into death with Christ, so that we will also be raised with him. This should be an enormous comfort to us. We are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. And third, this passage puts to rest the misconception that we can take Baptism for granted. Being baptized does not mean that we’ve covered our bases with God and we can live for ourselves, because then we have made ourselves to be our

own gods, and we are not living to God. Baptism brings us into a new reality. It brings us into a life of repentance and faith, where we die daily to sin through repentance, and we live to God in faith. Baptism creates a new spiritual life, and it is a life to be lived.

And, of course, the gospel lesson from Luke 3 teaches about both Baptism and the voice of the LORD. This is one of the very few places where we hear God the Father speak. The Father echoes the same thing later at Jesus' transfiguration (Luke 9:35), and he speaks once in *The Gospel of John* (12:28).

Here he expresses great pleasure in Jesus, publicly declaring him to be his beloved Son (3:22). Of course, the Father is always pleased with his beloved Son. But there's something special about his Baptism, because here Jesus identifies himself with us in our weakness.

We are baptized because we are sinful and weak. We are doomed to die. So we are baptized for repentance, so that we will receive the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38) and be united with Jesus in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-11). But Jesus has no sins to be forgiven of, and he needs no repentance. So he comes to Baptism from the other side. We come from the side of sin and death. He comes from the side of righteousness and life, and he joins himself to us there in Baptism. He joins himself to us so that he can pass through the mighty waters with us and for us.

Imagine a river, a dangerous, raging river. On one side of the river is the land of death. That's where we are. On the other side is the land of the living. That's where Jesus comes from. And the river itself is certain death, but it's the only way to the land of the living. We cannot swim this river. We will die. And Jesus dies too. But he's perfect, he's innocent, and he's God. So death cannot hold him. The river is his death and resurrection. He goes down, but he comes back up again. By doing this he tames the river. He gains power over it. So when we come to the river, he's already there. He has already forgiven our sins and conquered death. So we go to the river of Baptism, and it is death to us, but it's a different kind of death. It's being joined to Jesus in his death, so that we will also share in his resurrection. Since he has already passed through death and into life, he is able to lead his beloved children through it. It's like he says through Isaiah,

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.”

Jesus died and rose again to bring us through death, and his Baptism demonstrates this.

This is what really pleases the Father. It's like what Jesus says in John 10, “**For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again**” (John 10:17). It is the good pleasure of God to save you. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in one will: that you would be saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So the voice of the LORD, the powerful and gracious voice of the LORD, which called the world into existence, which still commands the physical and spiritual world, and which revealed Jesus to be his beloved Son, also calls you by name. He calls the baptized his beloved children through Jesus Christ. And he leads them through death and into life. Everyone who trusts in Jesus has everything the powerful voice of the LORD has promised through him. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.