

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

So, what do you think? Is God's holy voice one which makes the heavens thunder and the sky explode with bursts of lightning? Does it make the trees writhe and the very ground shake as Psalm 29 professes? Or is God's holy voice that still, small whisper which Elijah hears when he is in desperate trouble, the voice of reassurance and calm? I think the answer is "Yes". God's holy voice speaks wherever and whenever God wants it to be heard. In creating, in beginning, God's holy voice echoes through the universe commanding that there be light, and there is indeed light. And that day at the Jordan River, the same Jordan River through which the ancient Hebrews followed Joshua to enter the Promised Land of Milk and Honey, on that day when Jesus presented himself for baptism, God's Holy Voice greeted him with a message of kinship and affection, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased." When we read Psalm 29 together this morning, we recited seven times about the power of God's voice, and that number is no coincidence; For those ancient songwriters, seven was the number of completion, of perfection, and just as God completed all seven steps of creation, so God's holy voice manifests itself completely and perfectly and credibly throughout the world.

So, what do you think? Does one hear God's holy thundering or whispering voice at great dramatic times of revelation, like burning bushes, transfigurations, and significant baptisms? Or is God's holy voice a constant undercurrent in our lives, speaking to us as conscience, and encouragement, and reassurance? I think the answer is "Yes". Jesus has said that his sheep will know the holy voice, will recognize it, will discern it at all times from other voices. But that recognition depends on the readiness of the hearer, on whether or not one has the "ears to hear", so to speak. Some may be distracted by worldly passions, and only stop to hear when they are distressed or blessed. Some will respond only to the thunder and lightning. Others will take on the habit of listening for God's holy voice daily in the sounds of their surroundings; they will know God's holy voice in the beating of their hearts and the computations of their minds. But whenever it is heard, that voice is a reminder that the one immortal, invisible, God-only-wise, is certainly nearby and accessible, both for gentle conversation and awesome proclamation, too. As Jesus comes up out of the baptismal water and hears God's holy voice, the heavens are dramatically torn apart, while a gentle dove lights on his shoulder. The original Greek text implies that the dove not only lights upon him, but actually gently enters him. So it is, I believe, when we truly listen for God's voice.

So, what do you think? Is God's Holy Baptism an act of cleansing from sin? Or is it an initiation into the life of the church? Is it, as John the Baptist says, an act of humble confession which all should make to save their souls, or is it a weaving of our life's thread into the fabric which clothes the faithful? I think the answer is "Yes". John himself announced that the one who is coming after him will not only baptize with cleansing water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire, the word of God, the very voice of God. The ritual we have received from the ancients is for both cleansing and for renewal. But notice that John was calling adults to be baptized, not infants. He was calling his adult brethren to come to the river to contritely shed their sin. What sin can a child have to shed? What great divine commandments could a child possibly have ignored or broken? Yet, it is our custom to baptize children, not so much, I think, for cleansing, but for inclusion. They, as well as the adults of the faith community, should be an active part of the proclamation that Light has come into the world, and that darkness has not overcome it. That the insidious attempts to corrupt the clearer vision that God's voice commands in the simple phrase "let there be light!" have not worked. Light has triumphed over darkness. Whether one is a newborn child or a seasoned citizen of the faith community, Holy Baptism makes a statement about the ascension of

righteousness. In a few minutes, we will renew our baptismal vows together, making a statement ourselves about both our worldview and our readiness to hear God's holy voice.

So, what do you think? Is Holy Baptism a work of God, or a human ritual? Is Holy Baptism an opportunity which God promotes, or is it a liturgy, a work which the people have invented and choose to do? Is Holy Baptism an initiation initiated by God, or an initiation initiated by people of Christ's church? I think the answer is "Yes". In this Gospel passage about John and Jesus at the river, I think we see both. God has commanded, or at least coaxed Jesus' cousin John into calling the people to come. God is offering a cleansing, a redemption here at the river. And as the news has spread, crowds of Judeans, the guilty and the hopeful, have made the trek into the wilderness in response to the offer. Jesus, too, has come, but with a different intent. He has come not to receive an offering, but to offer himself. It is no coincidence that his ministry begins here at the famous baptism; Jesus really *wants* his identity as the Son of God. He really *wants* this life of mission and ministry. He comes to the river, to the beginning of his new life, not because he has to, but because he *wants* to. In this sense, he himself initiates the baptism. And he sets us thereby an example, a model for living, a model for what we can desire from our lives, a pattern for hearing that we are children with whom God is well-pleased. And, I believe, Holy Baptism is a two-way-street, a relationship, a covenant, something which originates from both sources simultaneously, from God's offer and from our own.

In the Holy Scriptures we have received from ancient sources, in the Bible we have inherited from our faithful ancestors, the four Gospels are followed by the entry known as the Acts of the Apostles, which can be described as a narrative of the history of the very early church, of the acts of men and women who spread the word about Jesus. They believed they had been commissioned by Jesus himself to continue his work, his ministries, and to build an organization, a church, which would act as his very body and faithfully carry on until his return. To empower them, they also believed that he had given them the gift of God's immortal and persistent Spirit, an empowering gift which they should share so that the whole world could be full of their missionary zeal. The book of Acts, as it is called, says frequently that this sharing, this sacramental distribution of the Holy Spirit, was enabled by the ritual of Christian Baptism. Thinking of baptism in the Christian sense, as an expression of covenant, as the establishment of a mutual relationship, was a key to opening the spiritual treasure which God was offering.

So, when Paul the early missionary came to the city of Ephesus, he found some random folks who said they were devoted to Christ, but were not inhabited by the Holy Spirit. When questioned about this, they said that they had been baptized in John's way, but were completely uninformed about any "Holy Spirit". What the heck was that? They had received John's baptismal cleansing, and John's call to believe in Jesus, the one who was to come after him, but had not yet really heard God's Holy Voice, so to speak. Paul proceeded to, well, re-baptize them in the name of the Lord Jesus, and the Spirit did indeed come upon them. But what Paul did is not some magic trick, what Paul said was not some enchanted incantation, but a call to model themselves after Jesus, who himself came to baptism with the intent not just to be cleansed from sin, but to offer himself to God, to solemnly promise to be a child of God, living out the pattern of God's values, participating in the triumph of Light over Darkness. And as these twelve Ephesians in the account we heard this morning offered themselves for relationship with God, they, too, began to share the Holy Spirit and be vessels for God's own Holy Voice themselves, prophesying as witnesses to God's Holy Word, God's eternal promises. So, does Holy Baptism express God's intentions or our own? I think the answer is "yes", and that when both God's sacred intentions and our sacramental intentions ring out in harmony, that the Holy Spirit speaks profoundly with God's own Holy Voice. Amen.