

Signs and sounds: Psalm 29; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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*Have you not known? Have you not heard?* asks Isaiah. *Those with ears to hear, let them hear,* says Jesus. *Day to day pours forth speech,* says the psalmist, but God's speech is pitched in such a register that many cannot distinguish it from silence.

In the sacraments we strain to recognize a divine word, even if it has to be mediated through the preacher's voice. At the baptismal waters, parents hear how the heavens opened above Jesus, the Spirit of God descended on him in the form of a dove, and a voice spoke from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." They hear this readily because they too are well pleased with their children and have come to hear this love ratified.

But everyone knows that the two situations are different. For Jesus (and perhaps others at his baptism) the voice was audible. How shall we imagine this happened? A disembodied God caused waves of sound to form in the air? Or placed a thought in the minds of everyone present, in such a way that they knew it was not their own? The mind staggers under the mystery or impossibility of God using a voice. Yet here it is, central to our faith, an instance of how the spiritual entered the material world.

In my church and maybe yours, this is the Sunday when we remember our baptism. The people shuffle forward as the organist stretches out a medley of hymns for 10 or 15 minutes. They dip their hands in the water, draw a wet cross on the forehead of the one next in line, and say, "Remember your baptism and be thankful."

Some people can remember their baptism, but most were baptized as children, and this may be the first time that some have heard a baptismal formula spoken to them personally. It is one thing to see the ritual performed for someone else; it's another thing to hear your own name.

A medical doctor once told me how he had fought against the idea of a personal God who intervened in human life. He sought refuge instead in music; Bach particularly appealed to him because of the mathematical precision of the fugues. Meanwhile, his life was falling apart. His first wife left him; he started drinking too much. One day as he was driving, he pounded the steering wheel with his open palms and cried

out, “God, if you’re really there, you’re going to have to say something! And you know what kind of man I am! No screwing around, now—no damn signs. You’re going to have to talk my language!” Just then on the radio came “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.” My friend sobbed, and laughed at what an idiotic but wonderful word this was to him. And just in case he might try to explain away the moment, saying that Bach was often played on that radio station (actually a nonclassical music station), the next song to come on was “The Girl from Ipanema.”

God does speak to us in uncanny moments, telling us we are beloved children and using our own names. Perhaps we’re not used to recognizing that voice in a sacramental world. Our radios seem to be on a wavelength different from God’s kind of broadcasting. And if we cannot hear God, then we will not trust God to do anything of consequence. We will believe only in a remote, ineffectual, impersonal process, rather than a powerful, demanding, loving force.

If we want to hear something more direct, we need to come to the baptismal waters, dip our hands in and awaken our senses.

Touching something grounds our faith and keeps it personal. Over and again, the psalms steer away from lofty theorizing and return us to a solid world. Psalm 29, for example, declares, “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.” The landscape is our own; rather than meeting us on some otherworldly plane, God enters our realm. The psalmist shivers at just how close God is. From here, it is not so far to the New Testament sense that “the Spirit testifies with our spirits that we are children of God.”

In Psalm 29, God works entirely through speech: when God says a thing, it is accomplished. All of the natural world responds to God’s agency. To read this psalm merely as a poetic description of a storm, as the New Revised Standard Version suggests, is to diminish it. Its insistent message is that God speaks in many dimensions, that this speech resounds from all directions, that it breaks upon the natural world with material consequences. It reverberates. One would have to be senseless to miss it.

The parents at the baptismal font can hear it. Their eyes glisten as they hold their beloved children. The rest of the congregation, having waited for all their prayers to be answered, hears something else instead. God says, *You are my beloved*. And

when God says a thing, it is accomplished.

My friend the doctor, who decided in middle age to become a disciple of Christ, says, “I spent a lot of years running after someone’s love. I didn’t find it in my work, and I didn’t find it in my marriage. It’s a miracle that I even came to church, because it sure wasn’t a big part of my life before. The nearest thing to it that I’d experienced before was music, which of course has beauty and rapture—but this new thing is personal. It’s love. I can’t tell you how it finally got through to me, but it did, and it’ll probably stay with me as long as I live.”