

## *A Voice from Heaven*

Matthew 3:13-17

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The baptism of Jesus must have been such a wonderful day. When Jesus came up and out of the water heaven was opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted on Jesus, and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” On that blessed day it would seem there could be no doubt, but that God was using his outside voice. They had gathered at the river, the river Jordan. Heaven was open. And the voice of God came from heaven. Surely it was God’s outside voice wasn’t it?

Ah, God’s outside voice. Now that is a voice that will get your attention.

- When God uses his outside voice the chaos of the cosmos starts to fall into order, sun and moon, stars and planets all find their orbits and courses, the mountains bolt upright and stand tall, the streams flow into rivers and empty into the mighty oceans, waterfalls cascade and seas surge. That’s what happens when God uses his outside voice.
- When God uses his outside voice the waters of the Red Sea split right in two. A big wide highway appears in the middle so the people of God can walk through on dry land. In celebration you take up the timbrel, you shake your tambourine, you sing for the God who is awesome, you dance and declare God’s glory, and you rejoice in the majesty of God. That’s what happens when God uses his outside voice.

King David was among those who gave a shout out for the glory and strength of God’s outside voice. Psalm 29, credited to King David, is a celebration of God’s outside voice, God’s voice of power and authority.

- The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters...that voice over the waters is God’s outside voice.

- The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars and makes nations leap like a calf...that voice, the one that breaks and makes and is full of majesty, that voice is God's outside voice.
- The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning.
- The voice of the Lord shakes the desert.
- The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forest bare.

King David wants us to know God has an awesome outside voice. That voice breaks and makes, that voice shakes and quakes. When that voice speaks things happen on a cosmic level. That voice, that awesome voice, that voice that shakes and quakes and breaks and makes is God's outside voice. So it seems pretty obvious when Jesus jumped in the Jordan River, when the heavens opened, and when a voice came down from heaven, when the voice of God came down from heaven, it seems pretty obvious that must have been God's outside voice. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Before we settle on the voice at the baptism of Jesus being God's outside voice, I wonder if you would take a moment to think with me about the possibility that God might also have an inside voice. That thought occurred to me when I read the Old Testament passage assigned to us this morning in the lectionary. For those who are not familiar with the lectionary, we are given four passages each Sunday, a selection from the Psalms, an Old Testament passage, a Gospel Passage, and a reading from the letters, or the epistles of the New Testament. Psalm 29 portrays the voice of God in a way that we can truly identify as God's outside voice. But Isaiah 42:1-9 conveys a different sense of God. In contrast to God's outside voice, imagine with me that Isaiah 42 invites us to hear God's inside voice.

In Isaiah 42 the focus is not on power and might. Isaiah 42 draws our attention to a servant. This servant does not rely on a loud, outside voice. "He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets." Whereas the outside voice shakes and breaks and quakes, this inside voice will not break even a bruised reed. A smoldering wick will not be stuffed out. These are soft images, calming images, compassionate images, protective

images, gentle images, kind images, and yes, quiet images. One commentator notes the servant described in Isaiah 42, this Servant of the Lord, will be marked by humility. He will not draw attention to himself. The Servant of the Lord will be marked by compassion, not confronting the bruised and wounded in society, but comforting them.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, like the outside voice, the inside will be heard. Despite the humility and the compassion, despite the kindness and gentleness, the inside voice will be heard.

The inside voice used by the Servant of the Lord will be a voice for justice and righteousness, two themes that run throughout the prophetic literature. If you are familiar with the prophets, your first instinct might well be to say they had anything but an inside voice. The prophets cried out for justice and righteousness. Like their New Testament counterpart, John the Baptist, they literally shouted at the top of their lungs that Israel and Judah and the people of God needed to repent! The Servant of the Lord is every bit as committed to justice and righteousness. By referring to the call of the Servant of the Lord as being the inside voice of God, we are recognizing that things as precious as justice and righteousness do not come simply because we shout and scream and holler. Working for justice and righteousness requires steadfast devotion to a cause. “The work of this Servant of the Lord will be marked by persistence. The Servant will not falter or be discouraged until the goal of justice has been achieved.”<sup>2</sup>

The persistence, the perseverance that marks the inside voice of the Servant of the Lord, reminds us that not everything God does happens immediately. The authority of God’s outside voice that called the heavens and the earth into being in an instant, the awesome power that parted the Red Seas in a flash, the loud shout that caused the walls of Jericho to crumble right before the Israelite’s eyes is not the only way God acts in our world. Maybe it was God’s inside voice, the voice that calls for patience and perseverance, the voice that calls for faith and trust, that guided ancestors like Abraham and Sarah as they waited long years for the child of the promise to be born. Maybe it was God’s inside voice that

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Evans, Jr., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1*, 162-164.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, 163.

sustained Jacob after he fled from his brother Esau as he experienced a long season where his soul was slowly shaped by God. Maybe it was God's inside voice that kept Joseph from giving up as he clawed his way from the throes of despair to the throne of Egypt.

It is suggested that the people who heard this promise of a Servant of the Lord were in their own throes of despair. The ones who heard these prophetic words were already two generations into the exile that followed the fall of Jerusalem and the ravaging of the temple. Without a doubt they longed to hear the voice of the Lord. As ones whose suffering seemed to know no end, I'm sure they wanted the outside voice of God that would vanquish all their enemies, eliminate all their troubles, remove all their obstacles, and make things just like they had been in the good old days. They wanted it all, and they wanted it now. Heck, they wanted it done yesterday. But the prophet says God is not recreating the past, God is doing a new thing. At that time, and at that place, this new thing would be done through God's inside voice, through the call of a servant, a humble and gentle servant, one devoted to justice and righteousness, one who would pursue justice and righteousness with dogged persistence and steadfast devotion. Although we do not find it in this Servant of the Lord passage in Isaiah 42, other Servant passages will tell us the pursuit of justice and righteousness will involve suffering, and wounds, and rejection. The Servant of the Lord will endure all this and more with dogged persistence and steadfast devotion.

I know Jesus was outside when he got baptized. It was under an open sky that soon became an open heaven. Jesus was standing on the banks of the Jordan and then immersed in the waters of baptism. I know it was outside when the voice came from heaven. And yet I still want to ask whether God was using his outside voice. I want to ask because there are a lot of things going on that make me think God might have been using his inside voice.

There is much in the baptism of Jesus that connects us to the inside voice of God. Jesus shows humility. Jesus comes to be baptized. John reacts to this request, saying to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Knowing what we know about Jesus, he did not

need to be baptized like we need to be baptized. What is so powerful about the humility of Jesus is that he is baptized not just for himself, but for us. He could have parted the waters like Moses. He could have walked on the water. We know he could have walked on the water. He didn't do that. He did not part the waters and he did not walk on the waters. He entered the waters with us like he entered this world to be with us and to be for us. He says to John the Baptist, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Baptism is a symbol of dying to the old and rising with the new. One day Jesus would do more than die a symbolic death by going under the water. One day Jesus would literally die, and his death would fulfill all righteousness. Remember, the Servant of the Lord would pursue righteousness and justice with dogged persistence and steadfast devotion. Oh, there is a case to be made when the humble Servant of the Lord entered the waters of baptism that we were witnessing an example of God's inside voice speaking in a powerful way.

This is not to say Jesus did not have an outside voice. He could speak and calm the storms. He could speak and make a handful of loaves and few fish feed a huge crowd. He could speak into a tomb and call out a friend. He could speak and the eyes of the blind would open. He could speak and the legs of the lame would work...like brand new. Jesus had an outside voice.

Knowing that Jesus had an outside voice makes his use of his inside voice even more meaningful. Jesus chose to be a servant. Jesus chose the path of humility. Jesus chose to spend his days with the weak, the lame, the outcast, the hurting, the least, the last, and the lost. His words were words of comfort and care, kindness and gentleness, forgiveness and grace, promise and hope. How his inside voice could touch a life that was in desperate need. The leper said, "If you are willing you can make me clean." You almost have to lean in to hear what Jesus says. "I am willing." With dogged persistence and steadfast devotion Jesus walked all the way from Galilee to Gethsemane speaking with an inside voice that echoes on and on and on, an inside voice that has reached many of us here.

Isn't that something? Just because Jesus used his inside voice does not mean that voice did not echo and reverberate.

- With his inside voice he said blessed are the poor in Spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers.
- With his inside voice he said turn the other cheek and go the extra mile.
- With his inside voice he said love your enemies.
- With his inside voice he said forgive seven times seventy.
- With his inside voice he said whatever you did for the one who was hungry or thirsty, naked and a stranger, sick and in prison, whatever you did for the least one of these you did unto me.

Have those words of the Servant, those words of humility, and patience, those words of dogged persistence and steadfast devotion, have those words been silenced? No. Not at all. We might find ourselves like those who wish God would speak into our world with his outside voice and right every wrong right now. We might want God to fix this world today, if not yesterday. But we also find ourselves drawn to this inside voice of Jesus, because we know his dogged persistence and his steadfast devotion have won a victory for righteousness and established a kingdom of justice that will not end. We have tasted of his salvation.

When I ask whether God might have been using his inside voice when Jesus was baptized, I hope we hear the voice of God. He says of Jesus, “This is my son whom I love.” He says of Jesus, “With him I am well pleased.” We can imagine God being pleased when Jesus did his miracles. When Jesus turned the water to wine what proud father would not say, “That’s my boy.” Can we also imagine what was running through God’s mind when Jesus said, “If you want to be great in my kingdom learn to be the servant of all.” Can we also image what was running through God’s mind when Jesus took off his outer robe and wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples? Can we also imagine what was running through God’s mind when Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends?” Can we also imagine what was running through God’s mind when Jesus hung on the cross and died, fulfilling all righteousness, fulfilling the promise that was made about a suffering servant so many years before, “He took up our

pain and bore our suffering...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him...and by his wound we are healed.” Into a hushed world that witnessed the death of God’s Beloved Son can you hear God using his voice, using his inside voice, to say, “That’s my boy. That is my Son. I love him. With him I am well pleased.”

The Gospel of Matthew never uses the words inside voice and outside voice. The Gospel of Matthew does not use those words at the baptism of Jesus, and they are not used anywhere else in the gospel. But Matthew does quote from Isaiah 42, the very words we have been looking at that model an inside voice, words of humility and kindness, comfort and gentleness. In Matthew 12:18 we find, “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight...” On that day of baptism, when heaven opened and a voice came from heaven, that voice from heaven knew who Jesus was and who Jesus would be. Jesus was the servant whose suffering would bring healing and wholeness. As awesome and powerful and majestic as God’s voice is, as God’s outside voice is, I hope we can see that when God spoke that day about Jesus, there was at least a hint of God’s inside voice as he said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Ones who study the scriptures carefully note that when the Servant of the Lord passages appear in Isaiah, there is a sense that it can refer to one person, the servant of the Lord, and it can also refer to the whole people, the children of God, who are called collectively to be the servant of the Lord. We take nothing away from the baptism of Jesus if we also accept that as Jesus lived out God’s inside voice with dogged persistence and steadfast devotion, the followers of Jesus live under that same call. When Jesus said he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, he then called his disciples to take up their cross and follow him.

Maybe this is our time to hear the inside voice of Jesus. Maybe this is our time to let his inside voice be our inside voice. Maybe this is our time to demonstrate dogged persistence and steadfast devotion to the words of Jesus that call us to be peacemakers, that call us to turn the other cheek, that call us to love our enemies, that call us to forgive seven times seventy,

the words of Jesus that call us to act with dogged persistence and steadfast devotion on behalf of the least, the last, and the lost. Maybe it is our time to make sure his words, the words of his inside voice have a hearing in our world today, a world in desperate need for justice and righteousness.

As I was trying to imagine what it might look like for the inside voice of Jesus to be heard in our world today, I came across an article about a new church that has been formed within our denomination, The Presbyterian Church USA. The church is located in Gig Harbor, Washington. When I say this church is an example of God's inside voice, I mean that literally. The church has been formed inside the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor, Washington. It is a prison that houses maximum-and-minimum-security inmates. When the effort to form a church in the prison started their goal was to have 25 women worship with them. They do not have 25 women...or rather, they do have 25 women, and more, 150 women total. The pastor who started this church in a prison said "she thinks the women have responded so positively because they finally feel safe in a worship service. They hadn't heard very much about one of the most important tenets of Reformed Theology—that you don't have to earn God's approval, redemption or love. 'The message that God loves them and that they are more than their worst mistake has transformed their lives.'" Here is how the pastor introduces communion. "On the night Jesus was betrayed by a friend, he was beaten by the guards. Then he was arrested and tried. Judged guilty, he was incarcerated and executed by the state." The women realize that so much of the experience Jesus had was similar to their own. Through this ministry in a prison the pastor says she now understands what Jesus was getting at when he said, "I was in prison and you visited me."<sup>3</sup> Two thousand years after Jesus walked this earth, the inside voice of Jesus continues to set people free. I wonder if God isn't saying to us today, saying to us as the church of Jesus Christ, I wonder if God isn't saying to us, "Use your inside voice." Where might God be calling us to use our inside voice? With dogged persistence and steadfast devotion, let us find the people and the places where God is calling us to use our inside voice.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Seebeck, Presbyterian Outlook, January 13,2020, p.7.