

CHRISTIANITY'S VOICE
I Epiphany – January 13, 2008 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close,
Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Today we hear the story of Jesus' baptism. We have moved from the joy and celebration of the Incarnation to the revelation of who and what Jesus is all about. Baptism is about beginnings, both Jesus' and ours. It is not an ending, although too many of us treat it that way. What we have today is the first understanding, or revelation of Jesus. His whole life is a series revelation, my New Testament professor, Reggie Fuller, use to say. Jesus' life gives us glimpses of what God wishes us to be as well!

The theme of "voice" links all the readings today. Each of the commentaries I read this week made mention of the voices: Kathleen Norris, Reggie Fuller, Herb O'Driscoll, Laurel Systra, and, H. King Oehim. It would help us to look at each voice in each passage and try to understand what's going on here.

First, let's look at the voice of the prophet Isaiah. The thing we have to remember about prophets is that the voice they have is not their own. A prophet has the voice of God. What they speak is God's message. In Isaiah, we have one of the servant songs that describe the role of the savior. The Hebrews had been in Babylon in exile, and now the voice of hope comes. They will be restored, they will be freed, they will return to their home! The servant coming is to be a light to all nations, not just Israel! The voice we hear is one of a servant. The way that God desires is that of a servant. The servant will inaugurate a time of peace, healing, compassion and liberation. For Christians, we see this new future coming in the person of Jesus Christ. He will be the model, the voice that we are to copy.

The Psalm talks of God's mighty voice! God is so much more than we can imagine. God's voice has the ability to change and transform us ... and the Psalmist hears this. In Acts, Peter finds his voice. What is recorded here is his first sermon. The theme of baptism also runs through the passage. Peter recognizes that there is a beginning for him as he takes up and continues Jesus' ministry. What Peter comes to hear is a voice that says the saving presence of God is to be available to all people! The Christian message is an inclusive and universal statement! The new community that we will call the Church is beginning to speak with a voice empowered by Jesus and the Holy Spirit!

The Gospel of Matthew gives us several voices, John the Baptist, Jesus and God's. In Matthew's Gospel, we have the first words of Jesus' voice. He says, that his baptism is to fulfill righteousness. This is part of God's plan. The first part, the voice says, "fulfill" ... this means that Jesus embodies all the hopes and dreams of Israel, and the world. He is the one who fulfills the Scriptures, who brings the voice of the prophets and God's into our lives today.

Jesus then speaks about righteousness? What's this? We need to beware ... too voices in our day put the word "self" in front of this. The voice of self says, "I'm right and you're wrong." This voice says, "I'm holy and you're not." This is not Jesus' voice! Righteousness talks about a new relationship with God! Jesus opens a new door between God and humanity. The new voice speaks in baptism and we see his call and beginning unfolding right before us!

Perhaps the most important voice to hear is God's in Matthew's Gospel. After his baptism, God speaks, "This is my son, my beloved ..." The word beloved also means chosen. What we see

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here is the recognition that Jesus is loved and chosen by God. There is something important here for us as well. By virtue of our baptism, we participate in the life of Jesus ... what applies to him applies also to us ... we too are the beloved! We too are chosen! There is a new age, a new relationship with God and a new future for Jesus ... and for us!

All these voices in Scripture today challenge us to find our voice. Herb O'Driscoll talks about how it is time for us to live out our baptismal renewal of vows. It is our ministry, our beginning too. Herb says God expects a full commitment on our part to the ministry of Jesus Christ. Our voice matters! We are to be part of the tradition of the voices of the people of God ... it's time for us to speak up!

With voices, there is always a need to be wary. Too many people use their voices as weapons, like those who speak, "But the bible says ...". There is always the temptation to make the voices meet our ideas rather than God's purpose. Too many people use their voices to wound, and limit others ... this is never been Jesus' way. Look at the voices that are quoted when Christianity is being defined. If they are not what you believe, then it's time to speak up!

We must use our voices and stop being silent! Herb O'Driscoll says that 4 out of 5 people come to Church because a significant person in their life invites them, or communicates with them, or speaks to them in a loving, caring way. It may be a parent or grandparent, a friend or a neighbor. Our voices do matter and we can bring people into the presence of God, help them hear God's voice, by what we say. Our voices can help transform the world by living and speaking the model of Jesus Christ!

Yesterday, I officiated at John's funeral. He was a man of few words, but there was so much depth to him. He was a bassoonist for the Philadelphia Orchestra. I remember one time when I visited; he took me into his basement to see his workshop. People from all over the world brought their instruments to him to be repaired. I remember seeing John with his wife at lunch or dinner around town, and he was always polite. He always had a kind word.

John's sons spoke at his service. They used their voices to provide a testament to this man's life. One of the things that I didn't know is that many people came to his home over the years to repair their instruments. John would put them up during their visit. You know how it is, you have something that is important to you ... a part of your life and livelihood ... it's hard to part with it. Time and time again he would repair the bassoons. Then John would speak. He would tell the people how much it cost to repair their instrument. When he saw hesitation in their eyes, he would quietly speak, "Well, pay me what you can."

Simple words ... but filled with compassion and understanding. John's voice may not have been the booming voice like God's in the Psalm, nor the sermon of Peter ... but he used his voice to make a difference in the lives of people he met. There are many ways to use our voices. John's way is one example. The reality remains ... it is time for us to find and use our voices! We can make a difference ... and all it takes is our speaking up! May you find your voice today!

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