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Epiphany 1A
Peace, Seattle
January 12, 2013
Matthew 3:13-17

BELOVED

His name was Sam Smith, and he was my voice teacher when I was at PLU, the kind of teacher who inspired you to excel; the kind you wanted to work hard for.

Sam expected a lot from his students. When I had worked hard, I couldn't wait for my lesson with him each week. But if I hadn't worked hard, I dreaded my lesson; I knew his ears would tell instantly whether I'd really done my homework or not.

But what I remember most about Sam was his VOICE. It had the most marvelously rich, sonorous quality I had ever heard. Just hearing him speak was all it took to convert me: I WANTED MY VOICE TO SOUND LIKE SAM'S.

During the University's annual Christmas Concert it was Sam Smith who served as narrator. His resonate bass tones washed over the audience like ocean waves upon the shore, communicating a sense of power and depth and self-control.

Psalm 29, which we sang with the choir a few moments ago, is a SAM SMITH kind of psalm. A psalm that uses powerful images from nature to celebrate the awe-inspiring VOICE OF GOD:

> **The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees…**
> **the voice of the LORD splits the fames of fire;**
> **the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;**
> **the voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe…**
> **and in the temple of the LORD all are crying, "GLORY!"**

This VOICE, this GOD, commands RESPECT, AWE, even FEAR. This is a God of MAJESTY, a God who INITIATES, who CALLS THE SHOTS; a GOD WHO'S IN CHARGE.

But this psalm is paired with Isaiah 42 today, and from this text—the first of the so-called SERVANT SONGS—we get a quite different impression about how God chooses to be present in the world.

> **HE WILL NOT CRY OF LIFT UP HIS VOICE, OR MAKE IT HEARD IN THE STREET, says the prophet, A BRUISED REED HE WILL NOT BREAK; A DIMLY BURNING WICK HE WILL NOT QUENCH.**

Well, which is it? Which one do we get?

- The God of visceral power who thunders forth with such force that trees are split and mountains skip like calves? The God whose Voice—like a St. Helen's blast—strips forests bare?
- Or the SUFFERING SERVANT, who will not cry or lift up his voice, who will not break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick? Who catalyzes justice not by means of force or sheer power, but through self-giving love?

Which one, finally, do we get?

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Today we are witnesses to Christ's baptism in the Jordan, and to the VOICE that came from heaven.

His baptism by John in Jordan's waters and the encounter with God's voice, is the event that ushers Jesus into public ministry, and each of the gospel writer's tells the story a little differently.

- In Mark it's almost a private revelation…as he was coming up out of the water, Mark says, "HE saw the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descending and the Voice saying YOU ARE MY SON, THE BELOVED..."
- In Luke Jesus is in prayer when the Spirit descends in bodily form, and the Voice likewise declares, YOU ARE MY SON.
- In John's gospel we hear of Christ's baptism in retrospect, AFTER IT'S OVER, as the Baptist describes what happened and how HE heard the Voice telling him THIS IS THE SON OF GOD.

As Matthew tells it, the VOICE from heaven was directed not first and foremost to JESUS but rather to those who were there is WITNESSES:

THIS IS MY SON, THE BELOVED, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED.

So there's some ambiguity in this text, some mystery, to keep us asking, wondering, contemplating what the core of the story is about.

Brother Martin (Luther), in a hymn lyric based on this scene, writes:[1]

So hear and mark well, all of you, what God himself calls baptism…
God speaks and wills, "Let water be," yet not just plain water.
His holy Word is also there, with the Spirit's gifts past measure.
He is the true baptizer.

All this he has shown us clearly in picture and in word,
The Father's voice at Jordan plainly heard.
He said, "This is my beloved son, in Him I am well pleased.
Him have I sent to you that all of you might hear and do as he tells you."

And so the Son himself stands here in vulnerable humanity.
Then down descends the Holy Ghost clothed in the likeness of a dove.
So that we should suffer no doubts when we approach baptism,
All three persons gather at our side, making themselves known
by dwelling with flesh and bone.

The witnesses may tell the story with nuanced differences, says Luther, but the Father's Voice was plainly heard. And don't we all long to hear those words:

You are my beloved, my son, my daughter, my child, with whom I am well pleased?

I spoke recently with a friend who called me on the anniversary of his mother's death.

That anniversary, so close to the holidays, was bringing all kinds of memories to the surface…many of them good, some of them of regret. Most of all, he was remembering what it was like to be loved and accepted as his very core; to have that relationship anchoring him in the world.

[1] Atwan, Dardess, Rosenthal, eds., *Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry*. (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1998) p.74

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With his mother gone, and his father, too, he found himself moorless and at a loss. He missed her presence, her voice; the things she'd said that he paid scant attention to then but now seemed profound. He longed not only to be called Beloved but to BE BELOVED to someone in this world again.

When we trace the gospel story out, follow Jesus from the Jordan to the wilderness to his ministry in Galilee and, at last, to Jerusalem, we learn that it is finally through the crucified and risen One that the VOICE of God is known as a voice of grace and mercy, a voice that fills the void and wills our good, a voice which calls us beloved.

During this season of light we will follow the ministry of Jesus and see how God's power and love are manifested in him. And we will remind each other, at the Font and at the Table, that we are beloved.

And that the Voice that called him into ministry calls us, too, each one, each day, to be Christ for each other. To be light.

Amen.