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Epiphany 1B
Peace, Seattle
January 8, 2012
Psalm 29:3-4; Mark 1:4-11

THE VOICE

His name was Jerome Hines—world-renowned opera icon; a bass whose four + decades with the Metropolitan Opera was longer than any other artist in the Met's history—and he was coming to play the title role in our small town production of BORIS GODUNOV.

For weeks during that summer of 1987 the cast of our community-based company labored to prepare the opera—the signature role of Mr. Hines' career—so that when he arrived for the final days of rehearsal, we would be ready.

But nothing could prepare us for the actual experience of his presence.
At 6 feet 6 inches, he was a physically imposing figure, and though he was nearing 70 years of age at the time, his bearing was such that he became the gravitational center of any room he entered.

When he spoke to us on our first rehearsal together, the authority and resonance of his deep voice kept us riveted to every word.

But it was the moment he first opened his mouth to SING that I will never forget.
Stentorian tones of color and depth poured out of him with such voluminous power that every molecule of space in the auditorium was filled to capacity.

Every jaw in the cast dropped, every eye popped, and every heart skipped a beat as we heard in his voice a sound beyond what we thought possible. Amazing!

Our novice caste was no match for him, of course—how could we be?
Nonetheless, the production became an unqualified success as, inspired by him, we reached toward new levels of artistry, and every night his tones washed over the audience—and us—like ocean waves upon the shore, sometimes crashing hard, sometimes lapping gently, but always communicating a sense of power, depth, and self-control.

Today's psalm uses images from nature to describe the awe-inspiring VOICE OF GOD: full of thunder and power. The Voice the poet describes here is the same One which called creation itself into being, setting in motion the whole drama of this universe; it flung the stars across the infinite canvas of space and established the primal pulse of life that continues to this day, billions of years later, to divide our days into light and darkness, day and night.

"MAJESTY" is a scarcely used word in our time, but it's the right word for describing David's profound experience of God's awesome, animate presence in Psalm 29.

> 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!!!"[1]

[1] Psalm 29:5-9 NRSV

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Sometimes I wonder if we haven't gone overboard in our attempts to make the Incomprehensible, understandable; to make the Divine, "accessible," with the result that the god we worship is so thoroughly housebroken, he is no longer the God of the Scriptures.

Sometimes I wonder if we haven't completely lost sight of the risk that attends being in relationship to the God whose voice shatters trees and makes mountains skip like a young wild ox.

> "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?" writes Annie Dillard, "The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."[2]

In her book The Writing Life, Dillard continues in the same vein:[3]

> I admire those 18th century Hasid[ic Jews] who understood the risk of prayer. Rabbi Uri of Strelisk took sorrowful leave of his household every morning because he was setting off to his prayers. He told his family how to dispose of his manuscripts if praying should kill him.
>
> A ritual slaughterer, similarly, every morning bade goodbye to his wife and children and wept as if he would never see them again. His friend asked him why. Because, he answered, when I begin, I call out to the Lord, then I pray, "HAVE MERCY ON US." Who knows what the Lord's power will do to me in that moment after I have invoked it and before I beg for mercy?

The Voice to which the Scriptures testify this morning is no domesticated voice. It's a Voice that makes every molecule of space vibrate with purpose, strength, and urgency.

St. Mark tells us that when Jesus was baptized at the Jordan, just as he came out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove and a VOICE came from heaven, saying: YOU ARE MY SON, THE BELOVED: WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.

What an overpowering experience that must have been! To hear the VOICE that could split trees and make the hillsides skip, call your name—call you BELOVED—to survive that experience!

The baptism of Jesus and the encounter with God's Voice, stands at the beginning of this season after Epiphany. At the other end of the season we will encounter the VOICE once more, as Jesus meets Moses and Elijah on the mountain of Transfiguration: three holy figures in the unfolding, sacred drama of God's plan of redemption; three whose lives had been marked forever by that same VOICE.[4]

This same VOICE uttered words over baptismal waters when you were baptized.
Whether you heard the "sound effects" or not on that day, God's voice was present then—and is evermore—in the word of promise:

> **Beloved daughter, beloved son, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever! YOU ARE MINE!**

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[2] *Teaching a Stone to Talk,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) pp. 40-41.
[3] Harper and Row1989. Page 9.
[4] Mark 9:2

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At a time in our culture when voices and images are great pretenders, crafted to gain access and influence over our deepest sense of self, how well are our ears tuned to hear this VOICE?

Can we learn to sharpen our ears, so that, in the midst of the cacophony of this modern world, this VOICE can penetrate the din, push past the veils of manipulation, and be heard by us?

During this season of light we will follow the ministry of Jesus and see how God's power and love are manifested in him. His is a voice, we will learn, that can calm anxious sheep as well as fractious seas.

And we will find, finally, that it is through Jesus' death and resurrection that we come to know the VOICE of God as a Voice not only of unequaled splendor and majesty, but a Voice of unparalleled grace and mercy; a Voice that knows us by name, that wills our good, a Voice that calls us through the waters to life abundant; even to a life beyond death.

Amen.