***THE VOICE***

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Texts: Psalm 29 and Luke 3:21-22

 I am not really big on reality TV unless it is the reality of a basketball game or news report, but I am at least conscious of the plethora of reality shows that are out there – some good, some bad, some ugly. One of those shows called The Voice just completed its ninth season. As best I can tell from the promos and little bit I have seen and description on the show’s website, a host of amateur contestants under the tutelage of vocal coaches sing a variety of songs upon which they are judged; the strongest vocalists advance and the losers go home until the field is whittled down to the final four – not to be confused with the NCAA Final Four – from which a winner is declared and is rewarded with a recording contract. Along the way there are blind auditions, battle rounds, knockout rounds, live sing-offs, and live performances. Last year’s winner was someone named Jordan Smith (not to be confused with Jordan Spieth) who has a beautiful tenor voice and who, no doubt, no one had heard of until he became the winning voice on The Voice.

 Most of us appreciate a beautiful voice like that of Jordan Smith or Jeff Ryman even if we don’t agree on the kind of song to be sung. Sometimes we appreciate not the voice but the music – hence the success of Bob Dylan and Rod Stewart – but it is not just in music that good voices are appreciated. While the comment, “You have a great face for radio” may not be a compliment, “you have a great voice for radio” really is. And some voices really are great! The voice of James Earl Jones is powerful and distinctive in almost any setting, Morgan Freeman’s voice is apparently enough like God’s to make him the voice of God in a couple of movies, and the variety of voices spoken by characters like Porky Pig and Bugs Bunny made Mel Blanc a legend.

 On a more personal level, familiar voices may be a source of comfort and peace for family far from home or for infants who recognize the voices of parents and those who love them. As we were leaving Atlanta ten days ago, Karen commented as I was prying her fingers off our granddaughter, “Tally knows my voice now, but will she know it when we next see her in three months?” Probably not. For a voice to be familiar we need to hear it again and again and again – unless it is so unique that it makes an indelible mark on our memories that cannot be confused with any other voice.

 If all those things are true of human voices, then what can we say about the voice of God? In Scripture God is often described in human terms. We imagine a divine eye looking down upon us, a divine ear hearing our prayers, divine hands shaping creation, and divine arms embracing us in our sorrows. We who are created in the image of God imagine a God who reflects our image on a grander scale. These anthropomorphisms – human characteristics attributed to God – are not physical realities of the divine, but they help us relate more closely to the invisible God who is Creator of the Cosmos and heavenly parent to us all.

 Not many of us have heard the voice of the Lord directly. We’ve heard the Lord’s words spoken through prophets and preachers and readers; we’ve heard the Lord’s voice mediated through the voices of saints and friends guiding us along our journeys of faith. But few of us have heard the voice of the Lord with our own ears. That was true too for the people of Israel who heard the word of the Lord communicated through the voices of Moses and the prophets. You might wonder just what God’s voice would sound like, were you to hear it directly. Would it be a deep booming bass, a soaring soprano, a gentle sweet voice, or barely a whisper?

 Psalm 29 describes the voice of the Lord as a thundering, powerful, majestic voice. It is the voice of a rip-roaring thunderstorm with flashes of lightning that split the night, peals of thunder that shake the foundations of your home and roll off into the distance, wind that bends trees and snaps branches. Such is the voice of the Lord, says the psalmist. It is a voice that inspires awe, and perhaps a little fear, in the hearts of all who hear it. It is powerful enough to split tall trees, yet it fills the nations with joy and leads all God’s people in the heavenly court to shout, “Glory!” It is a voice that reflects the power, majesty, and holy splendor of the divine speaker.

 That divine voice speaks from heaven at Jesus’ baptism, says Luke, but the earth doesn’t shake, nor lightning flash, nor thunder roll. It is not even clear that anyone hears the voice except Jesus to whom the words are spoken. Following his baptism as Jesus is praying, the heavens open and the Spirit descends like a dove upon him. And then a familiar voice from heaven declares: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Thus is the divine blessing given; thus is Jesus’ ministry begun – the carpenter leaving behind the tools of his trade to fulfill his calling as the beloved Son of God. There at the River Jordan the voice of the Lord speaks quietly, yet with power and great hope for all people.

Matthew describes the voice speaking to all those gathered at the river, saying not “***You*** are my beloved Son,” but “***This*** is my beloved son.” Matthew wants everyone to know who Jesus is as he begins his ministry. Mark and Luke recall it in less public terms. His baptism is not the stage for a divine press conference to announce to the world Jesus’ identity; it is the moment of his call, the confirmation of who he really is, his blessing from the mouth of the One who sent him. For Luke, Jesus’ identity is revealed to the people not directly by God but indirectly through those who testify about him, culminating in the words of the centurion at the foot of the cross: “Truly this man was righteous!”

 We bear that message today. It is our voices through which the voice of God speaks of the messiah of God. It is our voices that give thanks and praise to the God who sent Jesus into the world. The voice of the Lord still thunders, but it thunders in the power of the words, not in the resonance of the voice that is heard. It thunders in the words of the Lord that shake the foundations of the world:

 *Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich!*

 *Blessed are you when people revile you, but woe to you when all*

*speak well of you!*

 *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you!*

 *Turn the other cheek!*

 *As you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.*

 *I am the resurrection and the life.*

 *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it!*

The voice of the Lord still thunders and shakes our world. But the voice of the Lord also speaks in softer tones

to call men and women to ministry and service,

to guide and direct our paths and decisions day by day,

to call us back from wilderness wanderings,

to reassure us when our world seems to be falling apart.

Not in the thunder only but in a variety of voices great and small, the voice of the Lord still speaks of majestic, holy, awesome things and of simple, faithful things.

 The challenge is to distinguish the Lord’s voice from the host of lesser voices that are clamoring for our attention and claiming to have something vital that we need to hear. They are

 the voices of presidents and of presidential wanna-bes,

 the voices of advertisers that assault our ears at every turn,

 the voices of newscasters and talk-radio hosts,

 the voices of teachers and preachers and bums in the bleachers.

They are voices calling us to repent and love our neighbors

 and voices calling us to arm ourselves against our neighbors;

 they are voices calling us to welcome the refugee

 and voices warning us to turn refugees away;

 they are voices urging us to care for the poor

 and voices urging us to care first for ourselves;

 they are voices telling us to do what feels good

 and voices telling us that if it feels good it must be wrong;

 they are voices that warn us against acting out of fear

 and voices that warn us to be afraid, be very afraid;

 they are voices that bless and voices that condemn,

 voices that speak love and voices that spew hate,

 voices that proclaim God is with us and voices that deny God even exists.

The daunting thing amid the din of voices around us is that so many claim to speak for the Lord – but not all do. It is hard to imagine Jesus saying, “Turn away the refugee!” when he said, “Love your neighbor.” It is hard to imagine Jesus saying, “Get your semi-automatic weapon!” when he says, “Turn the other cheek!” It is hard to imagine Jesus saying, “Persecute the Muslims!” when he says, “Love your neighbor as yourself!” – and illustrates it with a parable about a Samaritan. We are called to follow only the voice of the Lord, and we may long for God’s voice to break through the cacophony like the voice described in the psalm – a voice that thunders and makes clear to us what we are to do and stirs our souls to shout, “Glory!” There are those moments. But day in and day out there are many more moments when the Lord speaks to us more subtly in still small voices or a whisper or the sound of silence. Are you listening anymore or have you tuned out any voices but the ones that tell you what you want to hear?

 “Dear God,” writes little Emily, “my mom says I’m not a very good listener. Can you talk a little louder?” Little Emily’s prayer might be our prayer, but perhaps God’s reply might be, “Can you listen a little better?” for in a world full of noise and overflowing with voices demanding to be heard, it is the voice of the Lord alone that blesses us with peace. Listen then for that voice, be so blessed – and perhaps, be a blessing! Amen