

“The Voice of the Lord Shakes the Wilderness”
Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Psalm 29

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendor.

The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters.

The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.

The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.

May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Genesis 1:1-5

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Acts 19:1-7

¹While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ²He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." ⁴Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—⁷altogether there were about twelve of them.

The Sermon

Seth Godin offers a daily marketing blog called “Seth’s Blog.” On December 26, 2020, he wrote,

“The social media companies optimized their algorithms for profit. And profit, they figured, would come from engagement [People getting into conversations].

And engagement, they figured, would come from confounding our instincts and rewarding outrage.

“Because outrage draws a crowd.

“And crowds establish culture.

“And [people’s] desire to be the leader of a crowd reinforced the cycle.

“And so,” Seth Godin says, “the social networks created a game, a game in which you ‘win’ by being notorious, outrageous or, as they coined the phrase, ‘authentic.’ The whole world is watching, if you’re willing to put on a show.”

But, he said, “That’s not how the world actually works. The successful people in your community or your industry ([and then he wrote,] please substitute ‘happy’ for successful in that sentence)—

[the ‘successful,’ or ‘happy’ people in your community] don’t act the way the influencers on Twitter, YouTube or Facebook do. That’s all invented, amplified stagecraft, it’s not the actual human condition....”

He said, “The shift that the leaders of the social networks need to make is simple. In the long run, it will cost them nothing. And within weeks, it will create a world that’s calmer, happier and more productive.

“Amplify possibility.

Dial down the spread of disinformation, trolling and division.

Make it almost impossible to get famous at the expense of civilization.

Embrace the fact that breaking news doesn't have to be the rhythm of our days.

Reward thoughtfulness and consistency and responsibility.

You can do this," he said. "Enough already."

The Letter of James, giving advice to people in the first or second generation of the Church, gave them a stark warning about how much trouble words can cause.

"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."

In other words not very many people are going to be able to just run their mouth and have that work out well, for them or for others—even if, at the time, they feel that rush some people feel when a lot of people excited to hear them talk.

James said, "For all of us make many mistakes...

"...The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.

"The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

"Every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

“With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

Sometimes it doesn't pan out for us on a small scale. A gifted and innovative guitarist named Adrian Belew wrote the musical score for a short film that won the Academy Award in 2017.ⁱ The next morning he and some of the others who had worked on it went to a diner for breakfast, and when the server came and it was his turn to order, he said, “I'll have an omelet and coffee.” And then for some reason he decided to add, “We're kind of celebrating. We won the Academy Award last night.”

And the waitress said, “You want bacon with that?”ⁱⁱ

Back I was naïve and innocent—which is to say, this past Tuesday—I had thought that this was supposed to be all about how the Voice of God is the most powerful force in the universe.

But we are living in a time when we are confronted by the terrible power of our own voices, human voices, human words.

The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

And the tongue is a fire.

It matters what you say. And it matters how you listen to other people, and what you decide to do with what you hear.

Always, we human beings are inclined to give greater credence to the words spoken by people who represent our own interests, and—increasingly these days—scream at and mock and dismiss what we hear from people who make us afraid of the consequences of them having more power than we can control.

That's understandable.

But it matters what we say, and when, and how; and it matters that there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.ⁱⁱⁱ

In both Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the Transfiguration, Jesus is with James and Peter and John up on a high place, and suddenly a cloud comes over them, and Moses and Elijah appear and are talking with Jesus, who is now glowing a dazzling white;

and Peter says, "Hey, I know what to do! Let's build three booths for each of you guys to stay in!"

And in both accounts, a Voice comes from the cloud:

"This is my son... Listen *to him*."^{iv}

It matters what we say, and when we speak; and how we hear, and to whom we listen, and what we do with what we hear.

Our words matter. And everything is not just a matter of opinion.

Nowhere in the gospels or anywhere else in scripture does God say that whatever religious belief you have, or whatever political opinion you have, or whatever disposition you have toward others, is perfectly fine and acceptable just because it's what you think.

God's people are never given entitlement to believe something just because it is what we are most comfortable with, or because it feels like it works for "our side," whichever "side" it may be.

And Jesus' disciples—you and I included—are never allowed to say just whatever we feel like saying, as if the First Amendment had been attached to the Ten Commandments and God was somehow required to countenance all of it.

God gives no Biblical indication of any interest whatsoever in our feeling that we enjoy absolute entitlement to say whatever we want to say—total freedom of speech—including convenient, pathological lying or calculated self-promotion under the guise of hand-wringing moralizing when it becomes politically useful to do so.

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God *said*: "Let there be light." And there was light.

We are confronted by the terrible power of our own voices, human voices, human words.

But the Voice of God is the most powerful force in the universe.

"Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings," said the People of God in ancient Palestine, "ascribe to the LORD glory and strength."

They lived on the edge of catastrophe, and their whole lives were subject to the natural world and surrounded by enemies against whom they were almost always overmatched.

Night was still terrifyingly dark in those days, and on land or sea or—for all they knew—above the dome of the sky, the deep waters held

dangers made more terrifying by their total mystery. Only God was greater than the waters.

They didn't see God, either.

But they knew that the most powerful force in the universe was the Voice of God.

The voice of the LORD thunders over mighty waters.
The voice of the LORD is powerful.
The voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness.
The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl
and strips the forest bare;
and in God's temple all say, "Glory!"

When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When Paul was in Ephesus and baptized the 12 or so disciples whom he found there who had never heard of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit came upon them.

And they spoke in tongues, and they prophesied. As Paul would write in his letters to the Corinthians, speaking in tongues, a gift of the Holy Spirit, is nifty, but more or less useless, unless and until you've got prophecy to go with it.

Because without interpretation and prophecy, speaking in tongues is just babbling nonsense, making a spectacle of yourself before God and promoting yourself before others. But speaking the truth—and only the truth—to a world that needs it is what builds up people and builds up the Church.^v

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in Ephesus at their baptism, they were given the gift of the Spirit, and immediately they began using it to build each other up.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. Siblings in Christ, this ought not to be so.

We can do this. Enough already.

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ⁱ <https://www.sunsigns.org/famousbirthdays/d/profile/adrian-belew/>

ⁱⁱ I wish I could remember exactly where, online, I read this anecdote from Mr. Belew. Most likely it would have been a King Crimson website.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ecclesiastes 3:7

^{iv} Matthew 17:5 and Luke 9:35

^v I Corinthians 14