

Baptism of the Lord – John Brittingham

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

“So this is the new year/And I don’t feel any different.” So sings Ben Gibbard of Death Cab For Cutie in the opening lines of their 2004 album *Transatlanticism*. This is one of my favorite songs, from either my favorite or second favorite album of all time. (All time, of course, being something of an accepted hyperbole when it comes to describing favorite things...) It is, indeed, the new year and we have all returned to work, to school, to getting inconveniently sick.

Let’s face it, getting sick blows big, gooey chunks. When you’re sick, you get irrationally cold while also sweating through your sheets. When you’re sick, you feel like the living embodiment of a bottle of molasses making its way down an inclined ramp. When you’re sick, you feel like the only things you can wear are the sartorial equivalent of comfort food—sweat pants, after all, are the mashed potatoes of leg coverings.

However, my favorite part of being sick is how it changes your voice. While it might make some voices sound like the whiskey-drenched vocals of a thousand old country songs, when I get sick my voice gets deep—like Barry-White deep. Being sick gives me a voice with a certain amount of *gravitas* that I never have when I’m not sick. *Gravitas*, for those who don’t know, is one of the main Roman virtues, along with *pietas* (duty or faithfulness), *dignitas* (prestige and dignity), and *virtus* (virtue). (Yes, one of the Roman virtues is called “virtue” but that’s okay, because it means something else.)

Gravitas is understood by the ancient Romans as being related to weight, seriousness, substance, or depth of personality. When it comes to the voice, *gravitas* means the ability to express this depth of personality in the weight of the voice. If you’re looking for an example, look no further than the greatest movie trailers of the past two decades. When you think about *gravitas*, all you need to say are those three magic words: “In a world...” (*In a world where cats can speak like people, Mr. Mostly-Mittens is a detective on the prowl...*) Lest you think that *gravitas* is only a male phenomenon, Dame Judy Dench, Emma Thompson, and Mavis Staples all have mad *gravitas*. (Mavis also has a high STANK quotient, which, if you must know, is the advanced statistical analysis metric for measuring the diva-tude of any and all divas.¹) And, if you think back to childhood, when you got in trouble, your mom had *gravitas*, too.

When I’m sick, I get to speak like I have more *gravitas* than my normal, verbose locutions provide. When you have *gravitas*, you don’t really have to say much, because how you talk does all the work for you. When you’re someone like me who doesn’t have *gravitas*, you talk a lot in order to make up for lacking a voice that sounds like it was constructed out of slabs of granite. Our lectionary texts for this week have something to say about *gravitas*, but, more specifically, about the voice. The voice is mentioned 17 times directly and indirectly in the four readings we have this week. God speaks creation into being, God’s voice thunders before the psalmist, Paul’s twice baptized disciples’ voices resound in glossolalic utterances, and the voice of God booms from the heavens during the baptism of Jesus. While this week is called “The Baptism of Jesus”,

¹ <http://www.theawl.com/2010/09/who-is-the-greatest-diva-of-the-last-25-years-we-offer-scientific-proof>

the lectionary texts present the voice as something worthy of consideration alongside taking a dunk in a spiritual swimming hole.

God's Creative Voice

As our new year begins, our lectionary selection begins with the beginningest of beginnings: Genesis 1. This is the first of two creation accounts and it's a rather short one at that. Certainly we have all manner of metaphysical speculation and theological meditation that can be taken from these first words of the Hebrew Bible. *In the beginning God...* is a selection of words that resound with importance. At the dawn of time itself (if we can even call it time at this point) God was there (if, in fact, there even is such a thing as there or place or spatiality or what have you). God is there, creating the world. The world was, in that time that was not time, *a formless void*. And over the face of the deep, deep void is God, rippling the surface of this nothing with the wind of God's presence.

The words used here are impossible words. I call them impossible because these first words of scripture are called upon to describe the impossible. How could words, mighty as they can be, possibly describe the creation of space and time and all that is without having recourse to that which already is spatial and temporal and replete with being?! We can't even imagine a time without time, a place without space, a nothing without a something. (And that's how I snuck the Critique of Pure Reason into a sermon.) The words are impossible and they are pregnant with anticipation. The deep quivers with anxious anticipation, hanging on for the slightest utterance from Elohim.

And then God speaks creation into being. *Let there be light*, God says, and lo, *there was light*. Now that...that is *gravitas*. A voice that speaks creation into being. That is the voice of God, creating a world with words. This creation narrative is not as complete as the second one, what with its talk of fish and snakes, and so-called "days." Our lectionary passage isn't even the whole first creation narrative. It's just the opening salvo, but it still draws us to think about the power of a voice.

Yet the power of God's voice is not what is central in this passage. No, it's the creativity of God's voice that is worth noting. Creation is the blank page, the empty canvas, the fingers resting gently on newly-changed guitar strings (one of the top five best feelings in the world, I might add); in the words of M. Scott Peck, *a world waiting to be born*. And God's first act is not showing dominance, nor is it putting everything in its right place like a neatly-ordered menagerie. God's first vocalization is creative. *Let there be light*, God thunders, and there is light.

The thunderous voice of God, the voice of power, is the voice we hear in our passage from the Psalter.

Thunder God: the booming voice of the psalm

The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders...over mighty waters, writes the psalmist in a seeming allusion to the Genesis account. Here in the psalm, we are given a

vision not of the creative God of Genesis but of a God who thunders. His voice is powerful and full of majesty, a voice so strong that it breaks the so-called legendary cedars of Lebanon. Lest we overlook it, God is also a fire-breather. Such a voice not only breathes flames but also shakes the wilderness. If it is not clear enough yet, our psalmist wants to shove down our throats the fact that the voice of God is not to be trifled with. It is mighty and worthy of awe.

This is not all we should glean from the psalm, for the psalmist then says in verse 9 that, *The voice of the LORD...strips the forest bare*. This is a voice that is revelatory. It peels back the layers of cover provided by all our personal masks and institutional vocabulary and Christianese, and makes clear what or who should be the recipient of our feelings of awe and devotion. It is a voice that, as St. Augustine claims, reveals *the shadowy depths of the mysteries where [we] will feed with freedom*. (I don't know what that means but it sounds cool.) Actually, I think what Augustine is trying to get at is that truth—and I'm talking about the kind of truth that matters—like the truth of who you really are and what you really care about; this kind of truth is revealed in and through hearing the voice of God. The voice of God is that which cuts through all of our noise and reveals to us who we are, where we dwell, and what we should be doing.

Our scripture readings from the Old Testament are clear when it comes to the voice of God. God speaks with power, force, and volume. God speaks with thunderous *gravitas*. But my experience of listening for God's voice is anything but a voice that shakes the forest. Trying to hear this voice of God often leads nowhere. It often amounts to more disappointment, more dark nights of the soul, than it does to fulfillment and joy. At least, that is how it appears on the surface. Certainly, we can say things like, "If you have ears to hear you can do _____," or things like "We can see God in the book of nature, and hear God in great works of art". And perhaps we can, but it is very, very difficult. Let's bracket this difficulty for a bit while we turn to our New Testament readings.

Sometimes, even when we do hear God, we don't hear it the right way, we don't hear it fully. Such is the case with our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples Paul stumbles upon are not the most informed group of believers in the text, given that they had been baptized into John's baptism and not that of Jesus. These were people whose behavior spoke of being different; yet, upon further inspection, Paul finds that they have not heard the full message. They were baptized into repentance, they were given the message as handed down by John the Baptizer, but that was only the beginning. They were like those who see only Episode 4 of *Star Wars* and believe it to be perfection without ever having tasted the soft glowing blue light of truth that is *The Empire Strikes Back*. Paul explains to these disciples that what they have heard is only part of the truth. The whole truth is that John the Baptist came as a herald or harbinger of what was to come, namely, Jesus. This Jesus, as our Gospel lesson points out, is baptized with the Holy Spirit, completing the work that the Baptist had been preparing for. The structure of both the reading from Acts and the reading from Mark are remarkably similar. In both baptism scenes, there is a moment in which the old voice must pass away and a new voice must be heard.

To cling to the old familiar voice is to cling to only a partial truth. It is to be too fearful to listen for the fullness of what God wants to say. To cling to the old familiar habits we might have, in terms of listening for God's voice, is to commit the same mistake as the disciples in Acts committed. While it is valorous that they were so devoted to the baptism they received, they

were only halfway there. In like manner, we cling to old ways of doing things because they are comfortable, because they are familiar, because they have brought us this far. But our Gospel lesson makes clear to us that coming to the river is not enough. John's baptism is not enough, it is only the beginning. There is a new baptism, that which comes from Jesus himself. This new baptism is a call to hear God's words anew, to hear them in a new way, resonating on different frequencies. A new year brings us yet another opportunity to pause and listen for the God whose voice creates, whose voice thunders, and whose voice splits the heavens and says to his beloved son, *With you I am well pleased.*

The parallels between the Genesis passage where God says of creation, *It is good*, and the Mark passage where he is *well pleased* should not be overlooked. Indeed, the statements seem to reverberate off of each other. Jesus' baptism could end with God thundering, *It is good*, while the creation of night and day could just have easily ended with, *With this I am well pleased.* These parallels bespeak a possible easing of the difficulty of hearing God's voice. When everything around us seems to be focused on the new, it can be easy to throw off tradition as stodgy, archaic, and slow. Yet I find something powerful in discovering anew the wisdom and comfort of the old. Granted, I'm a philosopher and therefore spend most of my days reading books by dead guys, but I still think that turning to the wisdom of the past, often forgotten, is a way to hear God's voice.

I close with these words from St. Augustine, which cut to the heart of the matter when it comes to hearing the fullness and thunderous creativity of God's voice. He says: *Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.*