

... thus says the Lord

Isaiah 43:1–7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14–17

Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

Text: Isaiah 43:1, Psalm 29:4, Luke 3:22

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

The voice of the Lord is powerful ...

And a voice came from heaven ...

Introduction

As an alumnus of Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto I receive the University's alumni magazine. There are seven colleges that comprise the Toronto School of Theology that are affiliated with U of T. The alumni magazine contains articles highlighting various aspects of the University's work, programmes, achievements, and students. I note, however, that there is rarely anything in the magazine about the work of the University's theological schools.

According to the Bible, the chief characteristic of the living God is that he speaks. Our society's institutions may be silent about God's address but this is not to be interpreted to mean that God is silent or that his voice is not being heard. The scriptures insist that the reality in which our lives unfold is one in which we are being addressed by God. The phrase "thus says the Lord" spoken by prophets is not a clever ploy to get you to listen to what they want to say next. This pronouncement 'thus says the Lord' describes reality—our reality. We humans are being addressed. To ignore this voice is to ignore reality.

So what does God have to say to us? The theme of God's voice or address runs throughout our scripture readings today and I invite you to reflect with me on some of the things God says to us. As we do keep in mind that this is reality, that God is addressing us now. Thus says the Lord ...

1. The portion we read from Isaiah is part of God's promise of restoration of his people. Israel is in exile and have been scattered in the deportation by the Babylonian empire. It is a wonderful word of hope promising that God will gather his people from the east and the west and the north and the south. Hearing this text

through the prism that is Jesus Christ we realize that the prophetic word spoken to Israel by God is rich and expansive in its fulfilment. Through the church today Jesus Christ is gathering a people for himself from the east, west, north, and south—yes, even here in Unionville.

This passage is one of those special passages that we turn to for a funeral service. I often read it as part of some opening scripture sentences that frames the service; passages that speak to the moment of standing in the valley where death cast its shadow. Thus says the Lord, Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.” What a wonderful word that not even death can thwart God’s purpose to redeem you.

Jesus Christ is the Holy One of Israel. It was that day at the wake of his good friend Lazarus that Jesus uttered explicitly the same promise implied through Isaiah, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live and,” then these ten words that sum up the message of John’s gospel “everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” He did not mean we would not experience death, he meant that even in dying we are never lost to God. This was made apparent when he called the now deceased Lazarus from the grave.

But there is so much more in this text. God says to his people, “I have called you by name, you are mine.” Whenever I read this text it leaps off the page because the Spirit of God witnesses to my spirit God’s voice whispering to me, ‘you are mine.’ There is something wonderful about belonging to someone. When one of my grandsons was a little boy of about three years of age Valerie and I had him and his older sister for a weekend. He was sitting in the pew with Valerie on Sunday morning and then I appeared at the front of the church. Valerie was having a hard time keeping him with her because he couldn’t understand why he wasn’t allowed to come and hang out with me at the pulpit. She did her best to explain but he kept insisting as he tried to escape her grasp, “but that’s my Papa.” There is something wonderful about having a grandchild claim you as their own.

There is something life giving in belonging to someone. To hear another person say of you in introductions—this is my wife, this is my husband, this is my son or daughter, this is my father or this is my mother or this is my good friend—that little word ‘my’ speaks volumes. Or think of those moments of intimacy as the

one who is earth's dearest to you whispers love from their heart—you are mine—don't you find great joy in belonging to them? And just to think that our Lord, who is great enough to embrace the universe, is close enough to enter our hearts and whisper to his people—you are mine. I love being his. Recall what Jesus said at that last supper with his disciples, "I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends. (John 15:15) The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. (Hebrews 2:11)

Listen to what belonging to him means. Do not fear... you are mine. UK Journalist Laura Dodworth has published a book titled "How the UK Government Weaponised Fear During the Covid-19 Pandemic" in which she examines how government and media organizations consciously aimed to induce fear as a means for influencing behaviour. That didn't just happen in the UK. The consequence is that people are fearful. We need to hear afresh this word from God. Do not fear you are mine.

"For I have redeemed you ... you are mine." The idea of redemption is to buy back. It is the picture of a person who fell on economic hard times and had to sell themselves as a slave or to other indentured arrangement. One who was a redeemer paid the debt and set them free. This is how the cross of Jesus Christ is depicted as the price of our redemption from sin paid in full. In faith we now belong to him.

"I have called you by name, you are mine." Generally speaking, we like to be called by our name. I have a good friend who has a marvellous innate ability to remember people's names. I watch him speak to people and ask about their spouse and children by name. I am a little envious of his ability because I have to work at knowing people's names. God knows you and calls you by name. The Apostle Paul, in thinking of the life to come, said, "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Highlight that last phrase, "even as I have been fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12) We are fully known by God and he calls us to himself to be his, sinful though we are. What joy! I have called you by name, you are mine.

I noted with you that this word spoken by God is a word to his people. The good news of the gospel is that this word is for any who would believe. As the Apostle John wrote, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." (John 1:12) Faith begins by trusting as much of ourselves as we know of ourselves to as much of God as we know of him. Today

you know that he calls you by name; receive him as your own and hear the rest of what God says to you...you are mine.

2. Psalm 29, the Psalm we offered in worship today, describes the voice of the Lord thundering over the waters, breaking cedars, flashing forth flames, shaking the wilderness, causing oak trees to swirl. The most powerful things in nature are shattered by his voice. The picture is that God's voice is powerful and full of majesty ruling everything. This psalm is one that was used in worship calling the Lord's people to ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name. It ends with the blessing "May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!" It is apparent that the powerful nature of God's voice is understood as blessing for his people.

In the Psalm, seven times we hear "the voice of the Lord" sounding forth with terrifying power. The culmination of this familiar nature imagery takes place in the temple, where the assembled congregation shouts, "Glory!" The God of the natural order was also powerfully in control of nature, ready to save. Heavenly windows open or close at God's bidding, and the storms mysteriously come and go, also at the will of the creator and master.

I invite you to consider that we hear something similar from the pen of the Apostle Paul in his Romans letter where he wrote, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

In October 2021 the editorial board of the Globe and Mail published an article about opioid overdoses titled [How bad is Canada's drug overdose epidemic? American-level bad](#). The pace of these deaths have risen sharply since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Studies in the US call many of these "deaths of despair" because they are linked to the losses of jobs, community, family, and faith. More work is being done by Harvard University to probe the impact of the losses in religious life with respect to this despair. I would simply note that as society lives life increasingly without reference to God despair goes up. The hope in trusting the God whose voice of love transcends the most powerful things in the universe surely helps us navigate difficulties that otherwise would leave us in despair.

3. When the gospel writer Luke tells the story of Jesus' baptism he doesn't focus on the baptism event, rather, his focus is on what happens after when Jesus was praying. It is here that this voice we have been thinking about speaks with riveting

clarity about a particular person, Jesus of Nazareth. “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” What the gospel writers say in story form and what the New Testament writers say in teaching sections is essentially this: this voice that has been speaking throughout the eons of time; this voice heard through prophetic utterances over the course of history, like the one we read in Isaiah; this voice that is praised in declarations like Psalm 19 because its power is for the blessing of God’s people; this voice finds its fulfillment, its full clarity in this person Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Word made flesh—he once said if you have seen me you have seen the Father. The voice declares to each of us to look to Jesus as it hovers over him and says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ The voice tells us to look no further, stop and look here.

The message of the gospel is that we humans have each turned away from God and gone our own way. The bible calls this broken relationship sin. The preacher John Stott said, “the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God; the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man.” It was at the cross that our sin was dealt with so that this relationship now broken could be set right. Another Biblical image is that we are spiritually dead and that in Christ we are made alive. Another image is that of redeeming—buying back and setting us free from the power and penalty of sin.

When God looks out over the entire human creation, God can’t find one human being, not one, who renders him the glad and grateful, cheerful obedience God expects from the people he has created. Whereupon God says to himself, “If I’m going to find even one human being who renders me such cheerful obedience, I shall have to provide that human being myself in the person of my Son”. And so we have Jesus, where God in his mercy provides the human covenant-partner of God who remains rightly related to his Father in life and in death.

And because Jesus of Nazareth is the one whose entire life and death are unbroken obedience, then insofar as we cling to him in faith we are bound so closely to him that when the Father sees the Son with whom he is ever pleased he sees you and me included in the Son: we too, clinging to this one in faith, are declared—effectually declared—to be rightly related to the Father. Listen again to what the voice says of Jesus—with you I am well pleased.

Thank you for joining me on this tour through our Bible readings today probing the wonders of “thus says the Lord.” In conclusion I hold before you Jesus Christ who is God speaking, who himself is the fullness of humanity as well as the fullness of

divinity, and that he himself is the way, the journey by which we may ourselves come to everlasting life.