

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 3:15-22

“His Love and Voice Are Everlasting”

Just a few weeks ago – I spoke to you about the words of John the Baptizer, that were spoken before today's Holy Gospel reading, in Luke 3:7-8 when he pretty boldly chastised the Pharisees, saying, *"You brood of vipers" (certainly not a compliment!) " who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham"* John was telling them plain and simple - it is about who you believe in – not who you are related to! He was saying that people are to bear fruit in what they do.

John's words penetrated right into the heart of the sinner and brought them to their knees in repentance. That kind of preaching and power only comes through the power of the Holy Spirit! Of course not everyone who heard him would repent. Many would walk away while still lost in their sin. Many would hear his message and they would turn away from their behavior - repenting and then allow John to baptize them in the Jordan River. God had him baptize so many people that he became known as John the Baptizer or John the Baptist.

I reminded you that the Greek word for getting the Word out is called **κηρύσσω** (kayrusso). Believe it or not, when I was in High School, a lady who served lunch in our cafeteria with a little net on her head was named Kay Russo! And so, I do not forget this word. Kayrusso **κηρύσσω** means “proclaiming, or preaching” – essentially living God's Word so that others would benefit from our efforts. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness just as you and I are in a wilderness of sorts today. We live in a fallen world with people who are always looking or searching for something, who are broken, and who are hurting, – and that something that they are looking for has a Name. His Name is Jesus. How we respond makes all the difference.

John preached about the coming harvest of men's souls and that message is just as real today as it was way back then. John said that Jesus was coming. Jesus, the Master builder, the Chief Cornerstone, the very Son of God, who had all power in Heaven and in Earth, was coming for a purpose. John proclaimed the truth in the Gospel of John 1:29 *“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* Not just the sin of St. Andrew's Anglican Church or any of the other churches in the Coffee County Ministerial Association, or for that matter, any other church! We need to be living and preaching the truth of the Gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Matthew in chapter 3 gives us a very similar view of John the Baptist that Luke wrote, with his warning the Pharisees and Sadducees. He went on to say *“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”* (Matthew 3:10-11) John was truly an inspired man who loved to

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proclaim the truth, (Kayrusso **κηρύσσω**) about *“the one who is more powerful than I”* and that He was coming soon.

Luke’s Gospel reading today offers us another view, as John wants to clarify for people that he is NOT the Messiah, saying, *“I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”* And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.” (Luke 3:16-18) John did not mince words, not by any stretch of the imagination – he spoke the truth, even to the point of letting Herod the tetrarch have it – both barrels, because he was living in sin with the adulterous Herodias. It was not at all popular, but it was the truth. I cannot help but be reminded of Jesus’ words recorded in John 8:32, which by the way are at the center of the Compass Rose, the seal of the Anglican Communion. Those words are in Greek but the English translation speaking about the **ἀλήθεια** (*alethaya*) – Greek word meaning truth. *“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* Jesus spoke the truth always, even to the point of some people wanting to kill Him. John spoke the truth about Jesus when he called Jesus the Lamb of God, and then God Himself would reveal the truth about Jesus when John baptized Him, as today’s Gospel of Luke says, *“When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”* (Luke 3:21-22)

In the Gospel of Matthew, this was recorded. *“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* (Matthew 3:16-17) This event was also recorded in Mark 1:11, *“And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

Imagine hearing the voice of God speaking to you – alerting you to what was really happening around you, or even guiding you how to live the rest of your life. People tend to doubt or disbelieve someone when they tell of hearing the voice of God speak. It is not an everyday occurrence. Let me give you an example of how God got my attention back in June of 1999 while at the Jordan River with my family and with our Bishop – who was then Father Neil Lebhar along with his wife Marcia and their son, Peter – who is now studying to be a priest. I had some severe nerve damage to my right leg and it was pretty much useless – in constant pain. Fr. Neil offered for us to recall our baptisms in the Jordan. We put on those white gowns that they give you. We went down the steps into the water, and the little, tiny fish were nipping at our feet. Marilyn went under first, and she came up, then I went under. When I came up from the river, everybody and everything was bathed in a bright, white light. Then my right leg began to burn, when numb, and the pain has been gone ever since. I did not realize that in a year, almost to the day, I would have my left knee replaced and I would need my right leg to be able to get around with a walker and crutches. God knew ahead of time what I needed. God certainly had my attention, to say the least, and others could see what took place as I ran up the

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steps out of the Jordan. I mentioned a few moments ago about Peter Lebhar, a very dear young man, and at a Diocesan Conference, he spoke to me about this event. He was about 10 years old on this trip, a multi-generational trip, he said to me that this was the first miracle that he ever witnessed. He said that he has since seen other miracles, but it was by that – that he knew how to recognize a miracle had taken place. That meant a lot to me.

That is not the end of the story. Two days later, at a place called Ein Gedi, in the Negev desert, Marilyn and the kids went to the top of the mountain to see the waterfall where David hid from King Saul, and I remained at the lower waterfall with two others. We shared our favorite psalms, some prayer, and then some quiet time, during which I heard someone call out “John.” I said “what?” The person sitting next to me, the Rev. Lynne Ashmead, told me, “no one said anything!” So, I closed my eyes and listened to the voice call my name again. I knew this time who was speaking, and He showed me an image of myself dressed as a priest, in white Alb and green stole, making the sign of the cross over the bread and wine at the table. With that, the voice once again spoke, saying, “you must do this in grateful obedience.” I was stunned, but knew that God had gotten my attention with the miracle of healing, and then speaking to me to direct the rest of my life. I opened my eyes and there was Marilyn, along with 10-year-old John and 6-year-old Theresa, coming down the path from the mountain. I ran to tell them, and then right behind them was Father Neil. And so I told him and he welcomed me, his Senior Warden at the time at the Church of the Redeemer, to the process. I asked him “what was the process?” He answered that “it is a huge mountain that you and I will climb together.” It is true that he has, indeed, and continues to. While this is a very special part of our lives, it is really a part of God’s story, using us for His honor and glory. This was God showing that His love and His voice are everlasting!

When Marilyn and I attended the Bishop’s Advisory Council on Aspirants to the Ministry at Camp Weed in Florida, in 2001, under then Bishop Stephen Jecko, there was a priest psychologist who said to me that a lot of time people want to enter the priesthood so that they can be idolized and loved. I looked at him and said that you haven’t read my resume then. I said I have been a radio disc jockey in New York, and I had introduced a lot of groups on stage at really large venues in New York. He then turned and look at me and asked me how often I have heard the voice of God. My response was “once, just once.” He understood, and so did I that there would be people who questioned what I heard. Just yesterday, Marilyn posted something on Facebook from a page called “warrior women,” that rang true with the experience of our calling. It said, “Not everyone will understand your calling, it wasn’t a conference call.” No, this was very personal.

At least in these Biblical instances there was more than one person who heard His voice. Witnesses to concur with hearing God speak – and identify His Son, Jesus. Gladly, there were other examples of God the Father speaking to the world about His Son. Jesus took Peter, James, and John, to a mountain and there “*while he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"*” (Matthew 17:5) This called the Transfiguration. This is also

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recorded in Mark. God is alive and can speak to people – when they stop talking long enough – to listen. His love and His voice are everlasting.

You might say “I’ve never felt a calling on my life.” Well, maybe it is not to the ordained ministry, to be a deacon or a priest. Maybe it is to go to seminary to learn and be a teacher. Maybe it is a call to be a vestry member, to be a Senior Warden, to be an officer of the church, as a lay Eucharistic minister, or as a lector – to read God’s Word. Those are all calls on people’s lives. You may not realize it, but maybe you got a sense in your heart that God was saying “you know you really ought to attend that confirmation class, and reaffirm in front of the whole congregation your love for Jesus. What ever it maybe it is to be the best mom you can possible be, and bring your children up to the way that they should be. Maybe it is to be a witness to others about the horrors of people and the evil that can be in their hearts. Whatever it may be, listen to God’s voice on your hear. It may not be audible, but it may be a still small voice that you hear whispered in your ear.

That day, as Jesus was baptized at the Jordan River, the incredible truth is that God, the Father spoke, Jesus, the Son, was baptized, and for the first time the Holy Trinity appeared, as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus bodily, like a dove. Present were, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This was a special miracle to be sure, which has given each one of us a special model to follow – as we have been baptized into the fellowship of all believers – receiving new life through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Sometimes we need to stop talking, long enough to listen for what God wants to do with us. His love and His voice are everlasting.