

When Heaven Speaks
Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17
by Anne Sims

Everyone wants to hear from God. Don't you? We hear stories of the saints who have heard God speak to them audibly. We read the email stories about lost children who are returned home or rescued whole from a wrecked car or saved from an accident by a mysterious disappearing stranger who is later recognized as something more. I don't think I know anyone who has heard God speak to them out loud, like you would talk to the person next to you, but I know that most of us kind of wish God would, just once, speak to us out loud, give us an answer, show us a sign.

It's been a long time for the people of God since God spoke so clearly ...since the signs were so obvious that everyone around knew that something extraordinary was happening. Once upon a time there was no denying when God spoke: things changed, people moved, they were dramatic and startling and amazing demonstrations of God's power. These are the stories we tell in Sunday School, and the ones that get etched in our memories, these tales of when Heaven speaks to us:

The act of Creation itself, when God spoke, and the sun and moon were born, stars lit the sky, the earth formed, oceans divided from land, plants grew, and birds and animals covered the ground;

Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, walking and talking in perfect fellowship with God, until their relationship was disrupted by their sin;

Noah heard God's call and built the big boat, rode out the flood with his family and animals of every description, and received God's promise in the form of a rainbow;

Abraham, whose visitation from God brought the news that this old man and his old wife

would give rise to the nation of Israel, multitudes of the people of God, in the person of a child, their child, child of their barren marriage and their old age;

Moses, who had repeated encounters with God: a burning bush that spoke, plagues and Passover, pillars of cloud and fire, time spent with God in a cloud on the mountain, with thunder and lightning crashing around him, coming down with his face so changed that he had to put on a veil so people could stand to look at him, and bearing tablets of stone with the foundation of the Law written on them;

Samuel, who was awakened in the night by God calling him, and answered with a life of service, saying, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening";

Elijah, who challenged Baal's prophets to see whose god would speak the loudest and was answered when God set a water-logged pyre ablaze;

Ordinary people named Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and John, who took their places in the history of God's relationships with people and in the genealogy of the Savior; And on to the generations since who in various ways have followed the word of God speaking to them. God does still speak...but I haven't seen a pillar of cloud or of fire lately, and the shrubbery's been silent.

Something singular happened in Jesus Christ. We've spent the Advent season and Christmas pondering the coming Messiah and the birth of the infant Christ. Last week Eric talked to us about the Wise Men and how their lives were changed by their encounter with Jesus, and with Herod. Something dramatic and drastic happened when Jesus was born, and God took on humanity to be one of us. We begin to get a glimpse of it in today's gospel story, the story of the baptism of Jesus Christ.

We know that John was the last of the old time, Old Testament-style, prophets, and that this cousin to Jesus (on his mother's side, of course) was one of the first to know Jesus for who he

was. We know, too, that he had his own ministry, his own followers, preaching the coming of the Lord. John baptized people for repentance, which we know Jesus did not need...but clearly this baptism was important for Jesus, as it was attended from above by the voice of Heaven speaking: "this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus came to be many things: the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the Savior, the Lord...and yet Isaiah describes the coming of the Messiah as the coming of a servant...one who would suffer for and serve his people, one who would come to bring righteousness and justice, mercy and grace.

This Servant, says God through Isaiah, will come not with trumpets and fanfare, not with torches and swords, but with a quiet voice and a gentle spirit, with loving persistence and constant care for his people. And he will come, says Isaiah, to be a light to the nations, to restore sight to the blind and to release those who are captives.

These words of Isaiah would be recalled by Jesus as he spoke about his calling and about his Father, God. And although they would have been familiar to any of the Jews with whom he came in contact, still people were confused about who he was, this son of a carpenter, this Nazarene from Galilee, this man...and yet so much more than just a man.

Who Jesus is, according to the Gospel of John, is the Word of God, in the flesh, incarnated for us and in us. This gives a whole new meaning to what happens to us when heaven speaks, as we find grace, power, and presence in Christ in our lives, in our fellowship, in our service.

When heaven speaks, things change. Blind Bartimaeus regained his sight and his place in society. Mary Magdalene found a sense of healing, acceptance, and belonging in Jesus' welcome. In the story of how Prodigal Son returned home, to the unending love and forgiveness of the prodigiously loving Father, the crowds learned about the endless love and grace of God.

In stories about the love of God and ordinary things: mustard seeds and mountains, houses built on sand and rock, lost sheep and lost coins, and in the graciousness of Jesus Christ, the word of God, people learned to love God, to trust God more, that they could themselves talk to God...and that God would hear, and would answer, those prayers. Paul was knocked off his high horse (okay, maybe it was a donkey) and into an understanding of the grace of God.

When heaven speaks, lives are changed. I was in Montgomery, Alabama this week, where Martin Luther King, Jr. preached and Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus...where the civil rights movement helped remind a nation that in Christ, there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female, black nor white. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, and all over the world, Christian missions are providing food, shelter, water, clothing, companionship, and care for people who have lost home and family and livelihood to war. In Morehead City, North Carolina, pastors and lay preachers bring worship and Bible study to nursing homes and rehabilitation centers so that those who cannot go to church, have church brought to them.

When Heaven speaks, anything is possible. Water becomes wine and a simple meal of bread and wine becomes the life-giving gift of Christ. Mud becomes salve for the healing of those in need. A sack lunch for one becomes a feast for a multitude listening to Jesus preach and teach. A gathering of 2 or more ordinary people suddenly becomes a moment in the presence of Christ among believers. And the tumult of our lives becomes calm, when Jesus speaks peace into the storms of our lives.

When Heaven speaks, everything takes notice, everything listens: and if we do not speak about the greatness of God in our turn, then creation, down to the very rocks, will witness to the goodness of God. Imagine, do you think there was anyone around on the day of Jesus' baptism who didn't hear God speak? Who didn't wonder at the sign? Who didn't ask, who is that man? We know from the Gospels that despite the prophecies, despite the signs, despite this clear word from God, many, dare I say most, people still misunderstood. They still missed the point. They still failed to grasp that there, in their presence, was God in the form of Jesus

Christ.

Is it any wonder our world now is no different? It is filled with people, starting right outside our doors and extending to the other side of the world, with people who have not heard about God, who do not know about Jesus Christ, who do not understand that there is a Savior who died and was resurrected for them. And many of those who have heard, like those Jews who did not recognize God in Jesus, simply don't get it...they don't understand the message...they have not heard Heaven speak in the words and deeds of Christian men and women who are trying to share the Good News.

This is where Heaven speaks today: in our words, in our actions, in our kindness to others, and in the way we live out the great love we have received. Heaven speaks when we pack up a shoebox to send to a child we don't know, who will hear for the first time about Christmas, and the Christ who came for love, and peace, and justice for all people.

Heaven speaks when we deliver a meal to someone who might otherwise not eat that day. Heaven speaks when we make room in our buildings and in our hearts for LOGOS, for Nar-Anon, for work teams and Sunday School and all the other ways we reach out. Heaven speaks in our Methodist Men, Women, and Youth, all of whom give generously of themselves to others. Heaven speaks when we welcome someone into our worship, fellowship, and service here at Ann Street, whether it is on a Sunday morning in the sanctuary or a Sunday evening in the fellowship hall or a Terrific Tuesday meal.

Heaven still speaks to us. And here is a part of what Heaven says: let them come. Tell them about Jesus. Show them his love, and let them sense his presence in you. And Heaven still speaks through us as God's gathered people, when others see our love, and Christ in it. When we share Jesus' kindness to others, Heaven speaks; when we welcome strangers into our midst, Heaven speaks; when we fulfill Jesus' commands: Love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves, Heaven still speaks.

The challenge, for you and for me and for all of God's people is to speak clearly the words of Heaven: God is love, for you, and for me, and for all people. We are called to speak Heaven's message, not our own, and that can be incredibly hard for us to do. But there is a world out there lost and listening, dying for a sense of connection, of community, of being a part of something beyond themselves, and that's what we have to offer in Heaven's words: we have an US that is God's people, God's family, God's gift that we are living out. So we have to speak them well, and honestly, and own them as a part of ourselves. We have to open up our church and our family to those who are not a part of it, and speak to them the loving words of Heaven, not the condemning words of the unkind, unloving world in which we live.

Just as Heaven spoke in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, so too Heaven speaks to us, and through us, the Body of Christ, alive with the Spirit of God. Are we listening? And are we sharing those words, that love, that belonging, that Heaven speaks?

Years ago there was a great ad campaign for an investment house. The slogan was simple: "When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen." Remember that one? In the commercials, if E.F. Hutton was mentioned, everything stopped: people were listening, waiting for some word of wisdom, some piece of knowledge, some gem that would improve their lives. Of course, it was easy to tell when E. F. Hutton was talking...they heard a voice, and everyone stopped and listened. A lost, lonely, hungry world is listening to every word we speak. What do you want them to hear? Let's offer them love, and hope, and belonging. Let's speak Christ to them.

Amen.