

The Spirit and the Voice

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

One of the reasons that I love studying the Bible is because it can hit you in a couple of different ways. Sometimes you're studying the Bible and you find all kinds of power and meaning in just a single word, or two words, and those can just carry you for 20-30 minutes. You can meditate on them all week long and they just keep giving you meaning. But you can also find power and meaning in the scriptures, not by looking at one or 2 words, but by looking at more than one passage of scripture. You might look at passages of scripture from different parts of the Bible that were written centuries apart from each other. They were written for different purposes, they were written in different parts of the world for different audiences, and somehow they all kind of weave together into this amazing story. On times like that you get to see the width and the depth of the biblical witness to the work of God in the world.

One of the reasons that I love that we have been using the lectionary for a while now to shape our usage of scripture in worship is that it can sometimes point us to those experiences of the passages' kind of inner weaving and banging around off each other's walls. And you get that really cool kind of width and breadth of God's witness, or the biblical witness to God's work in the world. So if you don't know what a lectionary is, if that's a new word to you, I'll briefly explain to you what it is. Very simply, it's a schedule of scripture readings. And for more than a year now we have been using the lectionary, so I don't choose the Bible passage that I'm going to preach a sermon from most weeks. Occasionally we've stepped away from it, but most weeks this schedule of text, which is set up way outside of Artisan and is used by thousands of churches around the world, that's what tells us which Bible verses will be read in our service and which Bible verses I have the option of preaching from. Now on a practical level, what that often means is I look through them and I find one that I want to preach from and I give a sermon about that one passage. And we might hear the others read but I don't preach on all of them. But some weeks they all connect in a really fun or interesting way, and that usually happens on the, you know, the big important days of the year (Christmas and Easter and so forth). And you get to see all of these texts working together, and the sermon becomes this

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fascinating (I hope) kind of wandering through lots of different passages of scripture all in one idea. And that's kind of what happened today. Today is one of those special days on the Christian calendar. It's not to the level of Christmas or Easter but we observe and remember the baptism of the Lord, the baptism of Jesus, today. And so the texts are already slanted toward each other a little bit. So I found that all four of the lectionary texts today had something to do with where I want to go, and I actually threw in a fifth passage of scripture, because 4 doesn't seem like enough. Now it just seemed like it was begging to be addressed along with these other things. And so as I go through this and draw on all four of these texts I hope that you'll see the connection between them. Also, I hope that you do read these on your own during the week leading up to Sundays. If you are a person who wants to read the Bible more often but you don't know where to start, I actually don't recommend starting on the first page and seeing how far you can get before you get frustrated or confused. It's usually a recipe for not reading the Bible. But the lectionary is a great place to start. We're working on getting it into our app. It's usually on the website, but you can always just search for the word "lectionary" and it will be the first result. You can click "This Week" and you can have the texts that you know will be read at Artisan and that coming week. So (that's) something you could do. And then when you get here and I'm doing one of those where I'm all over the place, it won't be quite so jarring for you. But for those of you who didn't do that yet, I guess buckle up [laughter]. We're in a little scriptural rollercoaster here today.

So I want to start with the Hebrew Bible reading also known as the Old Testament reading. This is a reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. This is a chapter 43, and if you'd like to follow along in the red Bibles, page 585 down at the bottom is where you'll start to see this text. And if you don't own a Bible please take one of them home with you today. These are gifts to you. You can study it on your own and read it on your own. But here are the words in the prophet Isaiah:

"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.
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 Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,

Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, 'Give them up,'
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.'"

Now the reason I want to start with this one is not only because it is quite beautiful and has really nice reassuring language, but because we're going to go all over the place it's a nice prepping point because it really does hit the high points of the story of God's people as revealed in the other parts of scripture. Now there is no prerequisite Bible knowledge for coming to Artisan and hopefully you can come to Artisan and and receive whatever happens here, including my sermon, even if you're not a Bible nerd or a Bible expert or if you didn't grow up in the church going to Sunday school where you hear all the Bible stories. But for those of you who are in one of those categories, you probably already have recognized some of those stories from the biblical witness being recalled and retold by the prophet Isaiah here. It starts right in the first verse, "Thus says the Lord He who created you." And of course, the stories of creation are right there at the beginning of the Bible. And it goes on to talk in language that might for the the hearers of this originally evoke the story of the exodus. Do you remember the story of the exodus when God's people were led out of slavery in Egypt, how did they get out of Egypt? What did they go through? The Red Sea. They went through the waters. It says right there, "When you pass your the waters I will be with you." Those of you who are particularly attuned to the story of Israel and to God's work in the world in and through those people might notice something that reminds you of the exile. There was a time when the Israelites were conquered and carried off into exile, and the dream during that time was that they would be able to go back to the holy city, back to the holy land, back to the promised land, back to the place that God had given to them. To those people who had that ringing in their ears the words, "Do not fear for I am with you. I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will

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gather you; I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the ends of the earth.'" Those words would give these people a sense of return from exile. So you can see these big high points in the story of God's people; creation, exodus, and exile. If you studied that, if we sat down and looked at it together for a while I bet you'd find some others as well.

Every significant moment in the history of the people of God God is shown to be present in those moments. And by making the point that God has been present with the people from the very beginnings of the world, Isaiah is able to, speaking on behalf of God, reassure the people that God is present with them now and will be present with them into the future. And that's a very important foundational point for everything else that we're going to talk about here today. God is present in these special moments. Now of course God is present at all times but in these special moments it's easier to see God's presence. And the story from today's assigned gospel reading is one of those special moments from the Christian story. Isaiah is of course recounting the Jewish story, and in the Gospel of Luke the reading that was read today before the children's moment, we received the story of the baptism of Jesus. The baptism of the Lord is this Sunday that we are observing today on the Christian calendar. This is a very important day for us. Again, not Christmas, not Easter, but it's up there. Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." That's the story from the gospel today and it's that voice that I want to think about and talk about with you for just a few minutes, not because the voice of God, the audible voice of God, would be the highest form of revelation. Although isn't it true that sometimes that's exactly what we wish for? When we have a tough decision to make, when we're feeling particularly down in the dumps or confused or not sure what's coming next. When we really want guidance or love, we really do wish that we could just be one of those lucky people who gets to hear the audible voice of God, right? Or if we're not a hearing person, maybe see the the words written on the wall like happened in one other story of the Bible. We would like that kind of special revelation, but that's not why I want to talk about the voice of God today. The reason I want to talk particularly about the voice of God is that the voice of the Lord is powerful.

In this passage and elsewhere in the Bible, God is often revealed and known by a voice. "The voice of the Lord is powerful." Where have we heard that before, that exact sentence, "The voice of the Lord is powerful"? It's already been spoken in this room since you were here -- well, most of you. Some of you showed up a little bit late, but not to judge [laughter]. But this text was read at the call to worship. It's from Psalm 29. "The voice of the Lord is powerful." Are you remembering hearing it now? I'll give you verses 3 and 4 from Psalm 29; "The voice of the

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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.” Now once again there's no prerequisite of Bible knowledge for you to be in the room with us today and for you hopefully to get something out of this teaching from the Bible. But in the context of ancient Israel, their whole community was shaped around the sacred text and the practices that were kind of described therein. And so for people of Jewish faith in the ancient Near East, the words of the psalm that I just read to you would instantly evoke a story from the sacred scriptures elsewhere. They would all have gotten it immediately. How many of you got it when I just read those couple of verses from the Psalm 29. What came to mind? Anybody catch imagery from the story of creation? For Jewish hearers that would have been an instant connection that they would have made. And so now I'm going to give you a just a little bit of Bible from outside the lectionary. This is that famous fifth passage I was talking about even though I haven't read five yet. But it's the extra one, Genesis 11. Listen, if you want to find this in your red Bibles just go to page one. But you can just listen to it, I'm actually going to read it in a slightly different translation than what the red Bibles is. It says this:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said [Scott: Say it with me if you know this one] ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

“God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” Now that phrase, “God said,” is going to be repeated eight more times in the first few verses of the Book of Genesis. The first few verses of the whole Bible, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God said, God said, God said. And it's the voice of God that makes creation appear. It's God's voice that makes something out of nothing, that creates a whole world out of what was formless and empty, or as the NRSV would have said, “out of what was formless and void.” And by the way, you don't have to have been present to hear the voice of God saying that, none of us were, for it to have meaning and power in your life. It is God's voice that makes something out of nothing. And did you catch something else in that creation story? It's God's Spirit that hovers over the emptiness and breathes life into it. The Spirit and the voice made the world. The Spirit and the voice made you and made me. The Spirit and the voice continue to make us anew each day. And the same Spirit and the same voice that were present at the moment of creation, at the dawning of the first few minutes of the known universe, that same Spirit and voice are also present at the baptism of the Lord. Did you see that connection? It's almost as if God wants us to see this moment in Jesus' life and ministry as another new dawn, as the first minutes of a new knowing of the universe. As an act even, you might say, of a new creation getting underway. But so far, in addition to being on this scriptural rollercoaster which can be a little bit hard to follow, we

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also seem to be way up in space where we're imagining a formless void where the Spirit hovering over waters and darkness. And it's all very "Tree of Life," right? It's very esoteric, and even when we get to something a little bit more on the ground when there's earth and water that we could imagine feeling in the story of the baptism of Jesus, it's still Jesus isn't it? We might be saying, well, this is all well and good for Jesus -- the Spirit in the voice. With Jesus, he was the Son of God. What does that possibly have to do with me? I don't necessarily expect the audible voice of God to crack out of the heavens like thunder and give me a special blessing. That was probably just for Jesus who was the Son of God. I don't expect the Spirit of God to take on a bodily form like a dove and come and land on my head. That's probably just for Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God, very special, not for me. Okay. But it's possible that you and I might have missed part of the telling of the story of the Good News of the Gospel. We have a little hint about where I'm going from the Book of Acts. This is the other reading that I haven't gotten to yet today. I'm just going to give it to you right now, you don't need to look it up unless you really want to. It's Acts chapter eight. Just a few short sentences about the Spirit being given to ordinary people, and not actually just ordinary people but people who would have been considered sub-ordinary. People from Samaria. They were the people from "over there." They were the people who did not have the right genes (and I'm not talking about, like, fashion). They were the people who were not considered to be as fully human as God's chosen people. And yet:

"...when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John[d] laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

This is pretty remarkable. Right here in the pages of scripture we have the story of people getting the Gospel, believing the Word of God, trusting in Jesus, being converted, and yet not quite getting the whole picture. Maybe whoever shared the gospel with them didn't have it all figured out. Could you imagine such a thing, a gospel preacher who still has some things missing from the equation? That's kind of reassuring [chuckles]. But they have joined the family of God but have not yet received the Holy Spirit, and so the church sends, I mean their absolute all stars, Peter and John, to Samaria to lay hands on these people who were up to that point thought to be subhuman. To actually put their hands on them and blessed them and and pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit, and they do. Maybe you've only got part of the story in your own life with God. Maybe you've read the teachings of Jesus and you think, "That's pretty good, I'll do that." Maybe you got saved a long time ago at a camp meeting or something but it never really meant much to you. Maybe you are a dyed in the wool believer but you feel like there's

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no yeast in the bread; there's no activity happening. Well, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit is what activates us for for an actual life of faith. According to the teachings of the Bible, the Christian church receives its power through the Holy Spirit, receives specialized gifts, and there's lists of them in some of the letters to the early church. The gifts that people are given so that they can be part of the body of Christ come from the Holy Spirit. The fruit that they are supposed to bear and that we, all of us, are supposed to be bearing as Christian believers come from the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit. I talk about this all the time when I do spiritual counseling with people. The fruit of the Spirit is such a wonderful indication of what's actually happening in your life because if you are a believer in Jesus and have received the Holy Spirit, you ought to be producing certain types of fruit. The gifts are a little different. Everybody gets a different gift to use in the church and in the world. But the fruit of the Spirit we should all be seeing, and if you're not seeing the fruit of the Spirit in your life that may be a sign that the Spirit is not present in your life or that you've kind of started to ignore the Spirit's presence in your life. And some of you Bible nerds, and I always talk about this because I always forget one, can help me remember the list of the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. Did I miss any of them? I got them all on one try for the first time ever [laughter]. As much as I talk about them I always have to go back to the list and meditate on it because it seems like one of them always slips away from not only from my memory, but from my life.

So maybe you actually need the Holy Spirit in your life because you're not seeing any fruit now. I have to point this out because I know some of you are aware of this reality within the Christian church that sometimes the talk of receiving the Holy Spirit, separate from a moment of conversion or a moment of belief in Jesus, that sort of in some circles ends up setting up this 2 tiered system where some people are more special than others because they have received the Spirit in a particular way that other people haven't. I am not going there at all; that is not what I want to lay on you this morning. I don't want you to have to feel that weight in any way. What I have in mind is something much more simple, much more quiet. Just a simple blessing and a prayer. So if you're thinking right now that this is making sense to you I want you to keep your mind open to that, and I'll come back to that in just a minute. Because maybe it's not the Spirit specifically that you find absent in your life. Maybe for you it's the voice that's absent in your life. And again, it's not that you are necessarily asking for an audible voice, something that you can hear, or writing on the wall that you could actually see with your eyes. Maybe what you need is something a little bit simpler and more subtle, and a little bit quieter. Maybe the voice that you need is nothing more or nothing less than the reminder, the reassurance, that you are God's beloved child. Maybe for one reason or another, you have been told that you are not worthy of that title, God's beloved child. I know that many of you in the room have received

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messages your whole life that you, for one reason or another, are not as worthy as the person you're sitting next to to be called a child of God. But I say that you are. And it's one of those cases where you don't have to take my word for it. These words of reassurance might not be spoken audibly so that we can hear them in the room, but they've already been spoken audibly so that we could hear them in the room because they were in the Scripture passages that I read just a few minutes ago from the prophet Isaiah. Would you like to hear them again? "Do not fear for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine." Where do you get your name from? Who gives you a name? It's your parents. God has called you by name. You are God's beloved child, you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you. I know that some of you never heard those words from your earthly parents and you carry that pain with you every day. But hear those words from your divine parent, from your Heavenly Father, to use the more old fashioned term. You are precious in God's sight and God loves you. And just in case on the way into church here today you heard something on the radio or you saw a sign on the highway or you recall the memory of something someone said to you that makes you think that you are actually outside of that circle, that somebody out there might be the child of God and there might be a whole group of them but you're not in it you're not part of it. The text from Isaiah today ends with this beautiful word: "everyone." This goes for everyone who is called by my name whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. Each one of you gets to receive that special truth that you are a beloved child of God. Each one of you is worthy of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit to activate you for power and ministry within the church and beyond the walls of the church, to begin to produce in your life the fruit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control.

And so I want to ask you to take a minute or so of silent reflection on what you've heard this morning, and then I'm not going to ask you to stand up. I'm not going to come over and into your personal space and lay hands on you, but I would like the opportunity if you would like to receive it, to give you a special pastoral blessing to pray for you to receive the Holy Spirit if you feel like that's what you need, and to be told once again that you are God's beloved child. And so after this moment of reflection I'm going to ask you to catch my eye if you'd like to have that happen. I won't call you out by name but I will say something in the room to everyone who catches my eye all together as one group. So would you take just a minute and reflect on the Spirit and the voice. [pause] Now I'll ask you if you'd like to receive that prayer and that blessing today that you can just look up and catch my eye. I see you, and this isn't a complicated prayer, it's not a complicated blessing. Here's what I want to say to you. Beloved child of God, receive the Holy Spirit. Beloved children of God, receive the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before we come to take communion we have been pausing for a moment of confession. That can sometimes be a confession of sin and sometimes a confession of belief, and we're going to

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do that second one today. And if you were here a couple weeks ago you may remember that we started to use the Nicene Creed instead of the Apostle's Creed for this confession of faith. That is some serious church inside baseball that you don't care about and I'm not going to bother you with [laughter] except to say that in this day when we're thinking of the Baptism of the Lord and the Father and the Spirit and the Son are present in one place, the Nicene Creed is a beautiful thing for us to say together because it's so cleanly and beautifully articulates the doctrine of the Trinity; Father, Son, and Spirit, one God, now and forever. So we'll put the words of the Nicene Creed on the on the screen and invite you to say them together with me as we prepare to take communion.

We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
Eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of one being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead.
And his kingdom will have no end.

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We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life.

Who proceeds from the Father and the Son,

Who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.

Who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

As our band comes and leads us in a couple more songs before we leave today, our communion table is open. And when I say open, I mean it's open to all who are seeking to follow Jesus in this place. You do not need to be a member of our church or any church to participate in this sacrament. May it be for you the real presence of the savior, the body and blood of Jesus. May it be an act of unity with each other and with Christians around the world and throughout time who have partaken of this same sacrament. And may it be food for your hungry soul. We have a member of the prayer team who will be at the back of the room and happy to pray with you in person if you'd like to receive prayer today. And as always it's OK if you just want to stay where you are and think or meditate or pray, but if you do come to the table come through the middle and leave through the outer aisles. We have two types of bread and both wine and juice; any combination that works best for you. Let's continue to worship God in sacrament in song and in prayer. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com