

In her book, *When God Is Silent*, Barbara Brown Taylor offers a great insight: in the passage we heard this morning from Exodus lies one of the most important turning points in the Bible. Well, you might say, that is kind of a no-brainer, isn't it? Wouldn't most Christians and Jews agree that the giving of the law – the Ten Commandments – is pivotal for Israel? I feel certain she would agree. But Barbara Brown Taylor is not speaking about the giving of the law. She is referring to a much more subtle – but equally important – event that immediately follows the Ten Commandments. With all the smoke and thunder and quaking earth and the force of these incredible laws most of us miss this pivotal episode she has in mind. Immediately after the ten commandments are given the people of Israel pull Moses aside: “Uh, hey, uh, well, with all this smoke and thunder and quaking earth we are a little freaked out... so, uh, well, you're pretty good this “talking to God thing” anyway. So here's what we want: you to do all the talking and listening to God for us... just let us know what God says... send an IM or something... we'll be off over here... you're doing a great job... you're the man!...” And so they separate themselves. Out of fear of God the people ask Moses to be their intermediary. They just cannot bear to have one-on-one time with God. Taylor notes that this is a monumental moment, for from this point going forward in the Hebrew Scriptures God only speaks to the people of Israel through a mediator.

Here we are, some 3200 years later, hungry for meaning, hungry for direction, hungry for God's voice. Almost annually local and national religious leaders are polled about what concerns the faithful most, and annually we hear that what people are searching for more than anything else in their lives is meaning, and a sense that they matter in this world. Now the wonderful insight that Barbara Brown Taylor gives us is that what Israel did on that mountaintop may be precisely the faith story of most Christians: at some point along the way we abdicate our voice, and we abdicate our responsibility to listen for God's voice. We entrust the listening and speaking to others – in good faith – and the end result is a sense of being lost and hungry. Or of working in the vineyard unaware of the voices of God – the servants of God we send away with bloody noses – or worse – because we no longer recognize them.

For the third week in a row Jesus teaches us with vineyard parables. In the first we learned of God's loving initiative to invite us into the Kingdom of Heaven, an invitation available and freely given to all. Last week we learned our proper response to God's initiative, to realize that we “are” before we can “do,” and that in that realization regardless of our circumstances we are beloved children, suddenly standing in the vineyard. This week we hear a parable about life in the vineyard – or rather lifeless life in the vineyard. In this parable Jesus is preaching to the religious elite of his time, who ignore the voice of God coming to them in the forms of prophets and finally in the form of God's own son. Their safe rituals and practices have kept the religious leaders plump and filled without the risk of actually coming face to face with God. Any threat, even in the form of Jesus Christ, is met with violent rejection. They prefer the sound of their own voice, to the detriment of God's will for them and the people they lead.

This parable so resoundingly speaks to the situation of Jesus and the Jewish leadership of his generation that it is hard perhaps to find our place in it. But if indeed we are, some 3000+ years after Mt. Sinai, hungry for meaning, hungry for direction, hungry for God's voice then perhaps this parable does have something to say to us. After all, this is ultimately a parable about a people who are unwilling or unable to let another voice – the ultimate voice – supersede the power of their own. Consider ourselves on our Christian journeys: whenever we lose God's voice in the plethora of competing sounds and voices – including our own – don't we become

equally fearful, unloving, uncharitable, and even violent? How do we find God's voice, and our song that sings God's word?

Last Sunday I briefly made a distinction between occupation and vocation. Now we tend to consider these two terms to be synonymous. If you ask someone "What is your occupation?" and then later, "Now, what is your vocation?" you will likely get a puzzled stare that says, "Didn't I just tell you that?" Webster's defines "occupation" as, "an activity in which one engages; the principal business of one's life." My occupation is what I do. Interestingly, "occupation" can also mean taking control or possession of some land or something that is not your own. We might ponder whether in our daily "occupation" who is possessing whom?

And what of "vocation?" Is this not the same as "occupation?" The poet William Stafford writes, "Ask me whether what I have done is my life." Parker Palmer, reflecting on these words, writes, "Some will say, 'Of course what I have done is my life! To what am I to compare it?' But for others, and I am one, the poet's words will be precise, piercing, and disquieting. They remind me of moments when it is clear that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like the river that flows [under a winter's surface ice.]" Stafford and Palmer both speak of a duality in our lives, that there is another way of being that some call "vocation."

"Vocation" shares its Latin root with "vocal," "vocabulary," and yes, "voice." "Vocation" has much more to do with calling – responding to God's voice – than it has to do with "occupation." A frequent misunderstanding is that "vocation" means a calling into ordained ministry. In my discernment process they frequently asked, "Do you think you have a vocation?" as if the answer could possibly be, "no!" I find that to be far too narrow a definition for "vocation." I prefer Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deepest joy and the world's deepest hungers meet." If communications are your passion, but you use your gifts for cigarette ads, you are occupied, but not practicing your vocation. If you run a shelter for abused children, but the work depresses you and leaves you empty then you are not engaging your vocation either. The beauty of Buechner's definition is that we must first hear God's voice for us – as threatening and scary as that may sound, and then translate that voice into our own voice. When we search for and live into our vocation we reverse the abdication of Mt. Sinai. We take our relationship with God into our own hands. God's voice becomes known to us, and we speak that voice in the language of our lives. We receive our vocation (and friends, this happens over and over again), whether we are 25, 55 or 85 years of age.

The learning of God's voice requires some intentional work. When I entered my discernment process the members of my parish discernment group – about 8 lay people charged with either recommending or not recommending me for ordained ministry – and I were asked to write our spiritual autobiography. There was grumbling: "Why me? I'm not the one who wants to be a priest... You do it for us..." To help us with this task we were asked to make a graph of our lives that showed the high points and the low points – the joys and the sorrows over the many years. Next we made a graph of our relationship with God, when we felt closest to and furthest from God. And then we superimposed the two. It was interesting that these two lines were typically divergent: when our lives were going great we were typically least involved in a faith community or prayer life, whereas when we were undergoing great challenges the presence of God was most palpable. Each of us were finally asked to write our narrative, our story, looking for that common thread of God's presence throughout our lives, to find for the first time

what our vocation seemed to be. I would highly recommend this exercise for anyone. I know that the members of my discernment group got as much or more out of it than I... and wasn't I the only one considering "vocation?" Those eight may have said "Yes" to my calling, but they resoundingly said "Yes!" to themselves as well.

Perhaps more than anything else the challenge for us in our Christian pilgrimage is listening for God's voice, and responding in the world with our own authentic voice. May God grant us grace to reverse the abdication of Mt. Sinai. May Jesus guide us to welcome his servants into the vineyards of our homes, workplaces, classrooms, and all other spaces of our lives. May the Holy Spirit give us the power and courage to speak in our own tongue the love of God into our lives. May we find voice, God's and our own.