

Some Said It Thundered

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on March 20, 1988, the 5th Sunday in Lent. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:10-17; Hebrews 5:7-10; John 12:20-33.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I remember a Peanuts cartoon that appeared years ago. Charlie Brown and Linus are looking at cloud formations. Linus, the intellectual, says to Charlie Brown, "See that cloud over there. It reminds me of Rembrandt's famous painting, *Nightwatch*. And over there, that cloud reminds me of Leonardo DaVinci's, *Last Supper*. What do you see Charlie Brown?" Well, poor Charlie feels intimidated by these brilliant observations and says, "Gee, I only see some horsies and some duckies."

Isn't it amazing how people can look at the same thing and see something different? Well, something like that happens in our Scripture lesson. ~~Some Greeks came to Jerusalem. They heard about Jesus. They~~ approached Philip and asked if he could arrange for an interview. Philip went and talked to Andrew and the two of them came to tell Jesus. We aren't told what happened to the Greeks-- whether they really got to see Jesus. Instead, Jesus starts talking about the necessity of his death. He must die before his ministry would bear much fruit in the Gentile world. And if he's lifted up on the cross and afterwards lifted up to heaven, then he'll attract the whole world to himself.

But in the middle of this discourse something strange happened. A voice comes from heaven to confirm what Jesus has been saying. But not everyone recognized the voice. The Gospel says, "The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him."

Which was it? The voice of an angel or the sound of thunder? Isn't that the way life so often is? ^{was your recovery a miracle or was it only a natural thing; was it} Some hear only thunder in the stormy events of ^{luck, chance or} life. Others hear ^{was it God's} the voice of God. It all depends on whether you have ^{Providence?}

ears to hear.

I love all kinds of music. I like Blue Grass music. I like some rock music. I really like the big band music of the forties and the rock and roll of the fifties. But I have to confess that when I listen to heavy metal music all I hear is thunder. But that same music speaks powerfully to some of you here this morning.

Or go back a few years to the music of Bach. People who study the history of music say that Bach's, *St Matthew's Passion*, is Western civilization's supreme musical achievement. When Felix Mendelsohn performed it in 1829 he was converted to Christ through the words and music. He heard the voice of God in it. Even the German philosopher and atheist, Nietzsche, said, "One who has completely forgotten Christianity truly hears it here as gospel." ~~But the church in Bach's day didn't hear the~~ voice of God in that composition. They heard only thunder. Shortly after Bach presented his *St Matthew's Passion* the church reduced his salary and complained that he wasn't doing anything.

Bach was known as the greatest keyboard virtuoso of his day but the church leaders griped. "If Bach continues to play in this way the organ will be ruined in two years or most of the congregation will be deaf." Some said it thundered when Bach played, others heard angels singing. How differently the same event can be interpreted.

One Christmas Eve after the worship service every one was filing out, shaking my hand, wishing me a Merry Christmas. One disturbed member approached me and shouted angrily, "I got absolutely nothing out of that sermon." That week I received a note from a young man who had attended the same service as a visitor. He shared how God had spoken to him through the message. Some said it thundered, others said an angel had

spoken.

Now apply this to the people you come in contact with every day. If you listen to people only superficially you may not hear what God is trying to say to you through that person. Friday and Saturday I was at the Laurelville Conference Center with the Synod Church and Community Committee. That was a radical bunch of people. I remember one time ~~when~~ a man stood up and thundered out some angry rhetoric that kind of turned me off. I heard only thunder. And then I began to really listen to what he was saying. God began to speak to me. I began to feel that God was speaking to me through this man shaking me out of my lethargy.

So often we simply don't hear what people are saying if they're different from us. The person may be some left wing liberal, or maybe a rightwing fundamentalist and all we hear is thunder when God is trying to speak to us through them. What's God trying to say to us through the thundering of an angry, rebellious teenager. What's God trying to tell you through the angry tirade of an unsympathetic parent. It's so easy to hear only thunder and miss what God's trying to say to us.

Sometimes we simply write off people. We say, "God certainly doesn't have anything to say to me through that kind of a person." And so we hear only thunder.

What we hear so often depends on our ears, not what's being said. What we see, so often depends on our eyes, not what we're looking at. When the first Russian astronaut returned to earth twenty-five years ago, he said, "I looked all around for God up there but didn't see him." All he could see was the earth and moon and stars. Twenty years ago this year many of us watched in awe as one of our astronauts read the Bible while circling the moon. It was like the voice of an angel. Some can't see God anywhere.

Others seem God everywhere.

Sometimes we sing,

I see the stars,
I hear the rolling thunder...

But that's all some people ever ~~see or hear; stars and thunder~~. They look and they listen but ~~they don't see God~~. They don't hear God. But others do hear God in that thunder. They see God's power throughout the universe displayed.

Storm clouds blow over all of us at times. We hear the thunder and see the lightning. Tragedy strikes. Things don't turn out the way we hoped. Everything looks dark and forboding. In those storms some people hear only thunder. Others hear something of the voice of God. There's a lot of thunder in the lives of this and every congregation. A lot of discordant noise. There are hurts. There's pain. Storms may be raging in your families. In this parish there are families ravaged by crises, marriages falling apart. There are young people in the church and in the neighborhood looking for direction and trying to figure out what Jesus or his church has to do with anything important in their lives. Sometimes I hear thunder about what we should be doing but will we hear, in all that thunder, the voice of God ~~calling us, into deeper commitment to Christ~~ ^{directing us and empowering us to} new adventures in faith, new forms of service. It's easy to hear only thunder, and miss the voice of God.

You've been sitting in this sanctuary now for about an hour. You've heard a lot of words and sounds. You've heard coughing and breathing and the sound of your stomach growling for lunch. You've heard the choir and congregation sing. You've heard prayers, Scripture lessons and a sermon. And inside your head you've all been hearing words; voices from the past, voices of people living far away, voices of loved ones, voices of friends

and voices of enemies. And you've heard your own inner voice. Sometimes all these words and thoughts thunder discordantly in our heads and we fail to hear God speaking to us. But listen! Listen for God in all the sound and fury and thunder. Listen! What's God trying to say to you this morning?

There's no thunder so loud that you can't hear something of the Word of God if you ^{have ears to hear,} ~~listen~~. On Good Friday the world was blanketed in deep darkness. Jesus was lifted up on the cross. To his friends and disciples it seemed like thunder. Those who knew him were depressed, shocked, numbed. They believed everything was lost. Those who loved him most woke up on Easter morning with pain that thundered in their heads. But those who could see through the dark and beyond the crucifixion ^{to} came to the tomb on Easter morning and heard the angels speak of the resurrection,

Let us pray:

Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire
O still small voice of calm.

Pastoral Prayer: This is Central American Week in the PCUSA. Let us pray for Central America.

Truly Lord, we know not what we do. We hear the din of conflicting voices on the right and left and in the middle who think they know what we should do. And it's hard to hear you speaking through the thunder of wild war cries.

We pray for the leaders of the nations of the world, but particular for the leaders of the US, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. For our nation: bless the leaders of our land. May we be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth. To the president and members of the cabinet, grant wisdom and grace in the exercise of their duties... To senators and representatives, give courage, wisdom and foresight to provide for the needs of all our people, and to fulfill our obligations in the community of nations. To judges and officers of our courts give understanding and integrity that human rights may be safe guarded and justice served. Teach our people to rely on your strength and to accept their responsibilities as citizens of a free land.

We commend to your gracious care and keeping all the men and women of our armed forces at home and abroad, and especially those in Panama and Honduras. Defend them day by day with your heavenly grace; strengthen them in their trials and temptations; give them courage to face the perils which face them; and grant them a sense of your abiding presence wherever they may be.

We pray, as well that you will strengthen those who suffer for the sake of conscience, especially those who have protested our recent actions in Central America. When they are accused, save them from speaking in hate; when they are rejected, save them from bitterness; when they are imprisoned, save them from despair, and to the rest of us, give us grace to respect their witness and to discern the truth, that our society may be cleansed and strengthened.

Now hear us as we pray for our particular church. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent and may we all find salvation and healing for the brokenness of our lives. Bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your Church. We pray especially...

Our Father.