

Do you remember that Peanuts cartoon that appeared about 20 years ago? Charlie Brown and Linus are outside looking up at cloud formations. Linus, the intellectual, says to Charlie Brown, "Look at those beautiful clouds. See that formation over there. It reminds me of Rembrandt's famous painting, *Nightwatch*. And over there, that formation, I see Leonardi DaVinci's, *Lost Supper*. What do you see Charley Brown?" Well, poor Charlie is somewhat intimidated by Linus' brilliant observations and says with some embarrassment, "Gee, I was going to say I see a horsy and a ducky."

Isn't <sup>it</sup> amazing how people can look at the same thing and see something different? A couple weeks ago Kay and I took the boys down to the Albright-Knox Art Museum. We wanted to give the boys a little culture. We came up to this one piece of very modern art. There were a couple of serious-looking adults commenting on the color and the artistic merits of the painting. Just then one of the boys blurted out, "Yuk, that painting is really sloppy." I was so embarrassed. I rushed them off to another corner of the museum. Don't you feel like saying something like that at times when you see some really way out modern art? The experts see something wonderful and profound but you say to yourself, "I could paint that well myself."

Well, something like that happens in our Scripture Lesson. Some Greeks came to Jerusalem on vacation. When they got there they heard about Jesus. They approached one of the disciples with a Greek name, Philip, and asked if he could arrange for an interview. Philip went and talked to Andrew (I don't know where Mark was at the time. He isn't mentioned) 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 launches into a discourse on the necessity of his death. He must die

before his ministry would bear much fruit in the Gentile world. And if he is lifted up on the cross and afterwards lifted up to glory, then he will draw, not only Greeks, but the whole gentile and Jewish 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? Some hear only thunder in the stormy events that enter our lives. Others hear the voice of God. What to some is the voice of God, to others is only a confusing din. It all depends on whether you have ears to hear.

Last Thursday I celebrated the 300th birthday of Johann Sebastian Bach by listening to my recording of ~~*The Passion According to Saint Matthew*~~. As I listened to the music I thrilled at the voice of God speaking to me through this masterpiece. Musicologists today consider *The Passion According to Saint Matthew* to be Western civilization's supreme musical achievement. When the young Mendelssohn performed it in 1829 he was converted to Christ through the words and music. He heard the voice of God in it. When the German philosopher and atheist Friedrich Nietzsche heard it in 1870 he said, "One who has completely forgotten Christianity truly hears it here as gospel." But the church in Bach's day did not hear the voice of God in that composition. They heard only thunder. Shortly after Bach presented his *Saint Matthew 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; still, the church authorities griped. "If Bach continues to play in this way," they

said, "the organ will be ruined in two years or most of the congregation will be deaf." Some said it thundered, but others said an angel spoke. How differently the same event can be interpreted.

Once, after a worship service, every one was filing by, shaking my hand, and one disturbed member angrily approached me and said, "I got absolutely nothing out of that sermon." That week I received a note from a young man who had attended the same service saying how God had spoken to him through my message. Some said it thundered. Others said an angel had spoken.

In this world everything is not as it looks or sounds. If you listen to people only superficially you'll never hear the whole truth and, what is worse, you may not hear what God is trying to say to you through that person. The person may be a liberal. She may be a Roman Catholic. And from our evangelical, protestant background we say, "God certainly doesn't have anything to say to me through that person. How could God possibly speak to me through a liberal?" And so we hear only thunder.

What we hear so often depends upon our ears, not what is being said. What we see, so often depends upon our eyes, not what we are looking at. When the first Russian astronaut returned to earth he said, "I looked all around for God up there but couldn't see him anywhere and I didn't here any harps playing." All he could see was the earth and moon and stars. All he could hear was the silence of infinite space. A few years later many of us watched in awe as one of our astronauts read the Bible from the moon. It was like the voice of an angel. Some can't see or hear God anywhere. Others hear and see him everywhere. It's all in the hearing ear and in the seeing eye.

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

the hymn writer said. 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 him. But others hear God in that thunder. They see his power throughout the universe displayed.

Some people look at a fetus and they see only growing tissue that is indistinguishable from the mother's body. They say that the woman has a right to do with her body whatever she wants. But others look at that tissue and they see an unborn infant, created in the image of God, crowned with glory and honor-- worthy of respect and the right to life.

Some people look at our stock pile of nuclear weapons and sophisticated defense systems and they feel safe and secure from all alarm. Others look at those same things and tremble in fear of the destruction that those weapons could wreak on civilian populations and nations, even the whole human race.

Storm clouds blow over all of us at times. We hear the thunder and see the lightning. Tragedy strikes. Everything looks dark and forboding. And in those storms some people can hear only the thunder while others hear something of the voice of God, even in tragedy. Mary Verghese was a brilliant young Indian surgeon who was crippled as a result of a car accident-- so much that she was only able to feel and move her arms and head. She believed God could still use her though, and she became interested in lepers. She realized she could transform their wasted stumps into something like hands and feet. Mary Verghese underwent surgery herself so that she could be made to sit upright in a wheelchair. Today in her operating room at Vellore she reconstructs hands and feet and faces-- the type of surgery that can be performed from a wheelchair, a type of surgery she would never have done if she had not been deprived of her normal strength. What for many would be catastrophe, for Mary

Verghese became opportunity. Others may have heard only thunder in her accident, but she heard God calling her into a new season of her life.

I know that there is a lot of thunder in the lives of this congregation. A lot of discordant noise. There are hurts. There is pain. Storms may be raging in your families. In this parish are lonely single parent families, there are unemployed men and women, there are crises ravaging our lives, destroying marriages. There are youth 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. I hear a lot of thunder about what we should be doing ~~but are we able to do it~~, but will we hear, in all that thunder, the voice of God calling us into deeper commitment to Christ and to new forms of ministry, new adventures in faith, new forms of service? What is only deafening thunder to some, to others is an angel speaking.

You have been sitting now in this sanctuary for an hour. You've heard a lot of words and sounds. You've heard the cars passing by on Elmwood. You've heard fire-whistles and ambulance sirens. You've heard birds chirping and dogs barking. You've heard the rustling of shoes on the carpet. You've heard coughing and breathing and the sound of your stomach growling for lunch. You've heard the choir and the congregation sing. You've listened to the prayers and to the Scripture Lessons and the words of this sermon. And inside your head you've also 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 voice. Sometimes all these words and sounds 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 that surrounds your life this morning. Listen! What is God trying to say to you

in all of this? Can you hear? Will you listen? Or will you be satisfied only with thunder?

There is no thunder so loud that you cannot hear something of the Word of God. That is what the story of Good Friday and Easter morning are all about. There is no thunder so loud that you cannot hear something of the Word of God if you listen. On Good Friday the world was blanketed in deep darkness. Jesus was lifted up on the cross. To his friends and his 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 came to the tomb on Easter morning and heard the angels speak of resurrection.

As we move a step nearer to holy week, to the passion and the cross, we can learn again that life is not all that it seems, that truth often lies beneath the surface:

that in senselessness there is often meaning  
 in despair there is often hope  
 in death there is life  
 in what seems like 'bad luck', there is God  
 and even in thunder, we can hear the voice of angels.

Let us pray:

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