

Power and delight: Psalm 29; Mark 1:4-11

As Mark begins, it might seem a little early for Jesus to be commended as one with whom God is well pleased.

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

In Psalm 29, the writer proclaims with majestic confidence that God is greater and stronger than every form of chaos, and by implication, than every idol through which we imagine we can control the manifestations of chaos. God is victorious over the wildness of water, storms and wind. Even mountains and trees appear unstable in the presence of God's strength.

In the midst of fierce weather, I don't first think of God's power and majesty. But unpredictable and destructive storms do remind me of how powerless we are despite our pretensions to, and obsessions about, control. Hurricanes and tornadoes can be devastating, terrifying and earth-altering, but the psalmist reminds us that the voice of God is even stronger. Surprisingly, after intense descriptions of God's power in and over storms, the simple request of the psalmist is that God would bless the people with strength and peace.

"The voice of the Lord" is a recurring image in Psalm 29, and in that psalm, voice is associated with power rather than words. God's power in and over all other forms of power frames our confidence in God's final provision and care. Even when creation itself seems to be spinning apart, the Lord is able to give strength and peace. But even given all of its majesty and authority, God's voice seems somewhat distant.

In Mark, the voice of God comes much closer and speaks more personally, yet it is still associated with earth-changing power. The voice rips heaven open and speaks directly to Jesus with words of treasured relationship, identity, commendation and delight. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark's introduction to Jesus and his ministry is abrupt, urgent, and filled with Old Testament imagery and eschatological expectation. The story begins in the

wilderness, a location full of complex meaning. Wilderness is a puzzling place of exodus, danger and judgment, as well as new beginnings, provision and grace. It is in the wilderness that John speaks words of warning and promise, and where people respond with confession. In the wilderness, Jesus is baptized and hears the voice of God. And then, by the Spirit, he becomes a sojourner deep in that wilderness for the next 40 days.

John's voice is powerful; it speaks from the wilderness and points the people to the way of redemption in Jesus, who is more powerful and worthy than even the prophet to whom they were drawn. The people respond to John's voice with confession of sin and baptism in the waters of Jordan. And then Jesus comes quietly and enters those same waters to experience baptism by John. Suddenly God speaks, ripping open heaven with a word of love and delight.

By our performance standards, it might seem a little early for Jesus to be commended as one with whom God is well pleased. After all, he hasn't even started his ministry. We expect that commendations rightly follow hard work; words of recognition belong at the end of a project or performance—after they have been earned. So how might we interpret this strange explosion of divine recognition and delight at the start of Jesus' ministry?

At the moment of Jesus' baptism, past, present and future, earth and heaven, are drawn very close together. Unfathomable choices had led to that baptism, decisions to "empty himself of all but love." In the midst of an act expressing the obedience and the sacrifice that would shape the course of Jesus' life, ministry and death, there are words of delight and love. The words do not render the future easy; immediately, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness for a long and difficult period. But the words do frame everything that follows. "Beloved" is both a first and final word about Jesus.

The word of love frames our identities and experiences as well. God's love for us is neither episodic nor earned; it is a first and final word about who we are and to whom we belong. But the texts keep us from turning this love into something tame, convenient or fundamentally therapeutic.

The "voice of the Lord" in the storms of Psalm 29, in John's words of judgment and promise, and in Jesus' baptism suggests that presumption is a decidedly inappropriate response to our belovedness. This voice does not offer an "I'm OK,

you're OK" sort of assurance. This is the God of the universe whose words of love contain within them anticipation of what it means to be the beloved.

A friend of mine struggled for a long time with a reorientation of identity after coming to Christian faith. Highly successful in her previous work and gifted in many areas, she was also deeply wounded from prior relationships and betrayals. She struggled intensely with questions of love and worthiness even as she prepared for pastoral ministry. In a moment of exquisite theological insight, she went home one night, grabbed her lipstick and wrote "cherished" across the top of her bathroom mirror. She'd finally gotten hold of the truth that could frame her life, the gift of love that would bring freedom for growth, service and love. She was freed for ministry by blessing.

Many voices call out to us, demanding our attention and shaping our self-perceptions, life choices, interpretations of our past and understandings of our future. In the midst of all the noise and competing authorities, the voice of the Lord, a voice stronger than storms and mountains, breaks the heavens open to deliver a word of love. "Beloved" is God's word for us.