**Resistance to the voice**. Yet, as eager as we think we are to hear the voice of God, we are remarkably resistant to it at times. Reflecting on our awareness of God's glory, John Philip Newell wrote: "Although 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God,' as [poet Gerard Manley] Hopkins says, our vision of the glory is impaired. In part, this is because our inner faculties of perception have become dulled and distorted. When we are not alert within ourselves, we will not be aware of the glory, even when it is glaring at us in the face like the brilliance of the rising sun breaking through the darkness of the early morning.”

**The sonic boom of Jesus' birth**. Just a couple of weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of God's living Word, Jesus Christ. The nativity, as we typically picture it, is nothing like an overwhelming wall of sound. Poetic renditions of Jesus' birth are more akin to a whisper: "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." But we shouldn’t abandon the psalmist's wall of sound so quickly. Our desire for Christmas peace may lead us to treasure "the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay," yet Jesus' coming into the world has a far more powerful effect on us. Its echoes still shake our lives.

The Christmas story from Luke's gospel (Chapter 2) conveys the sheer power of the Messiah's coming. The angelic choir which praises God and offers “peace among those whom God favors” is hardly the sweet band of choristers that many of us imagine. It is, in fact, "the heavenly host": God's own army of angels, chanting their Creator's praises like an army's marching cadence. We shouldn’t be fooled by the pastoral visions of the nativity: in Jesus, God is coming into the world to turn it upside down and to make all things new.

John’s Gospel calls Jesus the logos, the Word of God (1:1). This Word is the voice that spoke the universe into creation and which thundered over the waters. God’s voice is pure power which “causes oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare” and “shakes the wilderness.” If Jesus is *that* Word, *that* voice, *that* power, then surely, we can expect the babe of Bethlehem - or, more properly, the man he grows up to be – to shake us out of our sin and complacency!

**Discerning the voice**. As powerful as the Word of the Lord is, it can be hard for us, at times, to hear its echo in our daily lives. It's not like the LRAD in that sense. Hearing the Lord's voice requires discernment, a word which has a secular, as well as a sacred, meaning. Identifying the face of a friend approaching out of a pea-soup fog requires discernment. Picking out the crying voice of a child amid a cacophony of other children's voices likewise requires discernment. Choosing a mate or a career requires discernment.

Christians need the spiritual talent of discernment now, more than ever. There was a time when discerning God's presence in the world was as easy as sitting at the feet of Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount or, at the Last Supper, accepting the bread and cup from his hand. But no more. Jesus of Nazareth no longer walks among us. He is raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. His continued presence, in the form of the Holy Spirit, is a lot harder to pick out amongst the shouts and whispers of millions of our brothers and sisters, in love with the sound of their own voices.

When discerning God’s voice, Frederick Buechner makes this observation: "We are so used to hearing what we want to hear and remaining deaf to what it would be well for us to hear that it is hard to break the habit. But if we keep our hearts and minds open as well as our ears, if we listen with patience and hope, if we remember at all deeply and honestly, then I think we come to recognize, beyond all doubt, that, however faintly we may hear [God]; [God] is indeed speaking to us, and that, however little we may understand of it, [God’s] word to each of us is both recoverable and precious beyond telling."

Barbara Brown Taylor, referring to the signs that changed Moses' life, says: "Those were the good old days: burning bushes, angels of the Lord, pillars of fire, parted seas, all those unmistakable signs of the presence of God. What wouldn't we give for one clear direction from the Lord, one burning bush to call us by name and tell us what to do? At least I think that is what I want. I stay so busy sometimes I wonder if I would see it; I wonder if I am so focused on my list of things to do that I would not notice a burning bush until I was scorched by it. And then, like Moses, I am afraid of what the bush might know about me, of what it might ask me to do. If I stay busy with the little things, maybe God will not notice me or see that I already have enough to do and call on someone else to do the big things. So, I just hunch my shoulders, keep my head down, and mind my own business. A burning bush? I didn't see it. A burning bush? I haven't got time. A burning bush? There is a reasonable explanation. A burning bush? Someone, please, put it out."

The truth is, we don't hear God with our ears. We hear God in a spiritual sense, by means of the divine voice that resonates deep within our soul. Discerning God’s deep, resonant voice amid the world’s noise is challenging, but let me offer a few discerning questions to ask about the message we think we're hearing.

* Is it consistent with Scripture? "Let Scripture interpret Scripture." If a verse from the Bible seems to jump out from the page, take a moment to consider whether it's consistent with what we read elsewhere.
* Does it serve God's purposes? Does it spread the Gospel? Does it build up the church?
* Does it direct me along the path of humility? We're far more likely to be led astray by a voice that feeds our pride than by one that leads us in the direction of humble servanthood, after the example of Jesus Christ.
* Is it confirmed by what others are discerning? One of the powerful gifts the Lord has given us is the gift of community. Rarely does God speak a message to just one person which is not at the same time also being heard by others.

The author of Hebrews describes how we, as Christians, can most reliably hear and discern the voice of God today: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom [God] appointed heir of all things, through whom [God] also created the worlds. [Jesus] is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Lots of people spend their whole lives hoping one day to hear the voice of God. They yearn to have that one, unequivocal proof of the reliability of faith. Yet, we need not wait for an advancing wall of sound to overtake us like an auditory tsunami. We can hear the voice of God in a way far simpler and subtler: by entering a personal relationship with God's living Word, Jesus Christ. God doesn't need a sonic cannon to get the point across. God doesn't need to whirl the oaks and strip the forest bare. God only needs to point us in the direction of Jesus. He is our help and our salvation.

Prayer: Architect of the Universe, Your voice called out over the deep darkness and brought forth light. Your voice called out over the waters and brought forth life. Your voice called out over this earth and brought forth our very beings. Your voice continues to call out in the Universe, bringing new hope and new life. Help us to hear Your voice above the hum of the highway and the buzz of the business talk. Help us to hear Your voice in the cries of children, in the soft tones of the sick, in the pleas of the poor. May we hear, listen, and respond to Your voice in our lives and in our world. In Your name we pray. Amen.

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**'Boom!' Says the Lord**

Sunday, January 14, 2018 Psalm 29

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

As mariners in the Indian Ocean know all too well, the age of piracy is not over. Twenty-first century captains no longer fear the likes of Blackbeard, flintlock pistols tucked into his silken sash. They're more worried about Somali pirates bouncing across the waves in speedboats, racing to overtake slow-moving container ships many times their size.

Many merchant-marine and cruise ships are now equipped with an effective defensive weapon, a sonic cannon, or, in U.S. Navy jargon, a "Long Range Acoustic Device" (LRAD). The Navy developed LRADs after the disastrous October 12, 2000, terrorist attack on the USS Cole, off the coast of Yemen. In 2005, the crew of the cruise ship Seabourn Spirit used this new technology drove off an attack by Somali pirates.

The weapon resembles a small satellite dish. [See the bulletin cover] A crew member points it at the speedboat and hits the pirates with 150 decibels of concentrated noise. The powerful blast of sound causes excruciating headaches and ear pain, even temporary loss of vision and other physiological problems. In the case of the Seabourn Spirit attack, it caused the pirates to turn tail and flee the scene, no doubt saving many innocent lives.

LRAD technology belongs to the 21st century, but the concept is as old as the Bible. Psalm 29 imagines something like an LRAD burst in describing the impact of the Lord's voice: The voice of the Lord thunders! (v. 3); breaks the cedars! (v. 5); flashes forth flames of fire! (v. 7); shakes the wilderness! (v. 8); causes the oaks to whirl! (v. 9).

The psalmist portrays the God of Israel as a storm God who is far more powerful than Baal, the competing storm god of the Canaanites. This storm drives faithful people not to the disreputable "high places," but rather into Jerusalem’s Temple. No doubt, this was a psalm used in worship on some high holy day. God's storm-voice is echoed by the members of the worshiping congregation, who thunder back, "Glory!"

In this respect, the booming voice of God has a different effect than that of the LRAD technology. Sonic weapons are designed to send wrongdoers away, screaming; God's sonic boom - the thundering voice, the breaking of cedars and shaking of oaks - is intended to woo us, to invite us and the people of the world to come closer to God. The voice of God should cause the nations to gather in awe and to give God the "Glory!"