

**1 Epiphany – Year A – January 12, 2011**  
**Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

As children, some of us may well have been bullied or teased by peers or siblings. No doubt our parents all told us the same little rhyme to help us feel better, as they wiped tears from our eyes. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt them.” Yet every single one of us knows that words can be profoundly hurtful, and have a great deal of power to influence, leave suggestive seeds in our minds, and even lead unstable people to terrible acts of violence. Some acts of violence are driven by revenge, others by extreme zeal for a cause that has become an obsession, and many stem from fear. All violence is encouraged by the devil and his minions, because violence is contrary to God’s nature, disrupts relationships, and creates even more fear. Violence entered the world after humanity’s first sin in the Garden of Eden. If we read the earliest accounts of life outside the Garden, we see how the violence of humanity quickly escalates. The events of this past week are a testimony to the power of words thrown into the world with careless abandon by people from many walks of life, including politicians, extremists, and the media.

The voice of God is *the* most powerful voice in the universe. But there are plenty of people who ignore or refuse to listen to God’s voice, or use God as an excuse to execute their own twisted thoughts of violence into action. In the Book of Genesis, we read how the entire universe is spoken into existence. The Word made flesh is *the* most powerful human being ever to walk the earth. Jesus is a man of peace and justice, a man fully human and fully divine, who loved, healed and sought reconciliation with God for all humanity and all creation through His mission to the world. Yet Jesus too was subject to one of the most atrocious acts of violence in all history, being crucified as an enemy of Rome’s Emperor. Jesus’ own death was as politically motivated as any we have seen in the tragic assassination attempt on Gabrielle Giffords, the deaths of six other victims, and the numerous wounded survivors of the Tucson killing spree. Meanwhile, in Brisbane, Australia there are reports of tsunami-like floods as the Brisbane River burst its banks and several feet of water swept across towns in Queensland. It is also one year today since a devastating earthquake hit Haiti, a country that is still struggling to recover.

Tonight’s Psalm reflects the mighty power of the voice of the Lord God, Yahweh, breaking into our reality, this world, with disturbing and destructive power like a massive thunder storm. We also hear the same God of power and might, speaking tenderly of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, with whom He is well-pleased. Like the people of Isaiah’s day we too may be asking, can we trust this God? Is this the same God who refrains from holding back eruptions of violence that seem to spew out a kind of destructive fire, life-deadening ash and searing molten lava, leaving death and destruction in its volcanic wake? Is this the same God who does not calm the storms that devastate communities across the world? Is it the same God who reigns supreme and sovereign above the tumult of the world? Does God really care for us?

As we mourn the lives of those murdered in Tucson, and those who lose their lives every day in random acts of violence, or through natural disasters, you and I may well say that if God really cared, He would stop the violence, and prevent these natural disasters from occurring. He would intervene, reach down and make the world a completely safe, secure and peaceful one, free from all brutality and pain. Unfortunately, that would also be a world in which you and I – in which all humanity – are essentially prisoners of God, the puppet master. Do we really want to be mere puppets, without the God-given gift of freedom to make our own choices, and our own mistakes? Yes, even freedom to perpetrate terrible acts of violence, and to live with the consequences of such a decision. If we lived in such a world, would it really be living, or would it be merely existing for the pleasure and delight of our Creator and Master? Could we truly love and worship such a God?

There’s a terribly sad moment in the first *Toy Story* movie, where Woody, the longtime favorite toy of master Andy is casually thrown aside, dropped into the toy box, and left there, in favor of the latest and

greatest toy in town, Buzz Lightyear. The moment captures the only kind of relationship we could expect to have with a puppet master God. Not a covenant relationship in which both parties have obligations and power, but one where there is absolute power to use and abuse, to propose or dispose, to love or to leave, in the hands of the master. All true relationships are grounded in love, because the model for all earthly relationships is the divine relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Without freedom, there can be no real love. Love can only exist where all parties are free to give love, receive love, reject love, or share love. We can only truly love God, worship God, and offer ourselves to His service, if we are also free to reject God, and accept the consequences of that rejection. Unlike master Andy in the movie, our God has given us a New Covenant in Christ Jesus, our Lord. That covenant is pure love, healing and salvation, release from our sins, and the promise of eternal life. God loves us all equally and unconditionally. God desires to be in relationship with us. Our God is the only God we can trust to steadfastly and faithfully care for us. All the other little gods we turn to for security, like our investment portfolios, or other idols will always let us down. Sadly, we cannot trust ourselves to consistently respond to God or our neighbors in love. Our sin, the sin of all humanity, is that we choose to love other things instead of loving God. We choose to block the flow of God's love, and so we often fail to love our neighbors with mercy and compassion. We live with the consequences of sinful idolatry and the violence born of fear that there's not enough; with greedy eyes and hearts for what we don't have or can't acquire for ourselves; and with the lust for power that gives us the illusion of control.

The Psalmist speaks of the world as God's playground, powerless to resist God's commands. The references to God being enthroned above the flood, remind us also of God's gift of creation, the outpouring of love that creates, sustains, and redeems all life. God reveals Himself in all creation, and in His Son Jesus, the Word made flesh. Just as the Israelites did after their encounter with God, and God's revelation to Moses at Kadesh, we too must respond in some way to God's voice in Scripture, in Christ Jesus, and in our hearts. When we think about Jesus' life and ministry, the living embodiment of Love, Jesus also brings a great storm upon the world, and causes massive upheavals in the lives of those who wrestle with His words of truth, and with His life as divine revelation. We know that through Jesus' own suffering that God will not protect us from the consequences of sinfulness. But we also know through Jesus' resurrection that God redeems all who believe in Him, and ultimately the whole of creation is under God's sovereign rule.

The Psalmist speaks of the power of God's voice, God's Word, to create and destroy, and yet in the last verse we read of God's willingness to give us His strength, and His blessing of peace. Verse 11 provides us with our right response to God, our Creator. We are invited to pray for God's strength, and to participate fully in the peace of the divine promise, which is the peace that passes all understanding. In the words of St. Francis, "make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; ... for it is in dying that we are born to eternal life." We are chosen as God's ministers of peace and justice in this world. We cannot meet violence with violence. We can only overcome violence as Christ overcame sin and death, with His perfect love. We can only overcome the fears that drive and perpetuate violence by sharing the love of God in Christ Jesus. We can only overcome fear of shortage or lack, and greedy, acquisitive hoarding, by putting our trust in the Lord and His provision for all aspects of our lives. As God's chosen and adopted children, we have access to the power of God in order to bless the world with God's peace. We need only to pray for strength, and live faithfully. "Ascribe to the Lord, the glory due his Name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."

Amen.