

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

Genesis 1: 1-5; Psalm 29; Mark 1:4-11
January 8, 2012 Dean Feldmeyer

I imagine that you have all, at some time, seen the logo that is known as "His Master's Voice."

It features a dog, a terrier of some type, listening to and looking into the trumpet bell of an old Gramophone. Most of us grew up identifying that picture with the RCA company.

I always liked that picture and thought it was rather sweet but, recently, I discovered that there is a story that goes with it that makes it even more interesting.

The dog's name is Nipper, called that because, as a puppy, he would nip at the heels of visitors. He was born in 1884 and belonged to Mark Henry Barraud who was the manager of the Prince's Theater in Bristol, England. He and Nipper actually lived in an apartment in the theater.

Mr. Barraud died in 1887 and the care of Nipper was left to his brothers, Philip and Francis. One day the two men were listening to a cylinder phonograph and discovered a cylinder with a recording of their brother's voice. When they played it Nipper instantly recognized his late master's voice and would not stop staring into the trumpet bell trying to discover where his long lost master was.

One of the brothers took a photograph and, in 1899, three years after Nipper's death, Francis Barraud painted a picture based on the photograph, which he titled, "Dog Looking At and Listening to a Phonograph." He took the painting to the Edison-Bell company, thinking they might wish to use it in their advertising but James E. Hough, the president of Edison-Bell, dismissed the idea, saying, "Dogs don't listen to phonographs."

A few months later, Francis went to the Gramophone store near his home and asked to borrow a brass bell which he intended to use as a model to replace the black bell when he repainted the picture. William Barry Owen, the manager of the Gramophone store listened to Francis's description of the painting and the events that inspired it and said that if Francis would replace the phonograph in the picture with a gramophone, he would buy it, sight unseen.

Francis did so, changed the title of the painting to "Dog Listening to His Late Master's Voice," and sold it to the Gramophone Company for 100 pounds, sterling. They shortened the title to "His Master's Voice" and adopted it as their company's logo. Years later, when Gramophone was purchased by RCA, the logo went to RCA and continues to represent many of the company's divisions. Today, the picture, by itself, is in the public domain. The picture with the phrase, "His Master's Voice," is, in various versions, owned by HMV, JVC and RCA.

The take-away point from this story is, for me, the line spoken by the gruff old president of Edison-Bell, James E. Hough, when he sent Francis Barraud packing: "Dogs don't listen to phonographs."

Well, maybe as a matter of course, they don't, but there is one very clear exception -- the one proved by the picture -- when a dog will most certainly listen to a recording device, be it a phonograph, gramophone, Dictaphone, MP3 player, or whatever, and that is when it plays...His Master's Voice.

And that, brothers and sisters, is what the scripture lessons for this morning all have in common. They all contain examples of or speak to the phenomenon of God speaking and the effect which God's voice has.



THE POWER OF THE SPOKEN WORD

Before we get to those specific examples, however, let's talk about the historical and cultural context in which these passages were written:

The Psalm is probably the oldest of the passages though the date is almost impossible to pin down. It is called "A Psalm of David," which means that he may have written it or it may have been one of the psalms that he collected into the royal library. But most scholars feel comfortable dating it around 1010 BCE.

The creation poem which is quoted from Genesis probably dates back in oral history to the time of Abraham, say about 2000 BCE but was not actually formalized, written down and recorded until around 580 BCE during the Babylonian Captivity.

The Gospel of Mark is usually dated about 75 CE.

So, we have three pieces of literature all written about 500 years apart but all having in common the fact that human communication was very limited in those days. The written and spoken word was about all there was. And written words weren't all that popular since the vast majority of the population, probably about 99 percent were illiterate.

So the spoken word was the primary form of communication for all three of these writers.

It still is today, you know. Oh, lots of people can read, but most choose not to. They rely on television and radio for the news and information they seek. And, today, cable TV allows us the opportunity to hear only the news we want to hear and with which we agree. So, even though we have a greater ability to read and more stuff to read than ever before in the history of humankind, we still rely mostly on the spoken word. Fortunately, unlike our ancestors, we have things to aid our speech -- things like recording and broadcast devices. We have public address systems to amplify and project our voices when we speak. We have tapes and CD's and MP3's to record what we say and save it and play it back later.

None of that existed back then.

The human voice was all there was and it depended, as a tool for communication, on the power of the one who spoke. Did the speaker have a loud voice? Did the speaker have a clear voice that was easy to understand? Did the speaker speak from a position of authority as a king or a priest, a prophet or a seer, a governor or a centurion?

Whether or not a person's voice was heard, whether or not people listened when a person spoke often rested on the physical ability of the speaker AND the status and power of the speaker in the culture.

Whether or not people stopped and listened to this or that voice had much to do with the owner of the voice. Was the voice simply one among many? Or was it "his master's voice?"

THE VOICE OF YHWH

This morning we focus our attention upon OUR Master's voice.

What kind of voice does God have? How does God make the divine voice heard? And when that voice is heard, what does it say?

We begin in Genesis with the creation poem.

Here, God's voice is a power for creativity and organization. God speaks the universe into existence and then organizes it. God has created heaven and earth and now he begins to organize and order his creation through acts of separation. First, he creates light and separates light from darkness. In a few verses he will continue with this organizational process, separating land from sea, wet from dry, plant from animal from human, and so on.

So, the authors of Genesis tell us that if we want to hear God's voice we need search no further than the creation and organization of the universe. In fact, theologians such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas believed that nature was where God's voice could be most clearly heard and God's will most perfectly discerned. They called it "natural theology."

Today, natural theologians hold that God's voice and will are clearest in those things which involve creativity and organization. Destruction and chaos are the antithesis of God's will and his voice is not found in them. Christians, they say should avoid anything that leads to or finds its birth in destruction and chaos.

It is in creation and order, they say, that a Person of God most clearly hears "his masters voice."

The Psalmist, whether it is David or someone else, would not agree.

Listen again to a few verses from the 29th Psalm which we read responsively this morning. God's voice is explicitly and specifically mentioned seven times:

³ The **voice** of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.

⁴ The **voice** of the LORD is powerful;
the **voice** of the LORD is full of majesty.

Okay, so far so good. The writers of Genesis would have no problem with these two verses. In fact, the first line, about the voice of the Lord being over the waters, is almost lifted right out of Genesis, isn't it? And power and majesty almost go without saying. It is the voice of the LORD, YHWH, after all.

It's in these next verses that we seem to break ranks with the Genesis writers.

⁵ The **voice** of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷ The **voice** of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

⁸ The **voice** of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹ The **voice** of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'

Now we have the very chaos and destruction that the Genesis writers wanted us to eschew and it is caused by the voice of none other than YHWH, Lord of Hosts.

First, we have the voice of the Lord breaking the biggest, most perfect, strongest trees in the Ancient Near East, the cedars of Lebanon. And then that same voice causes a whole nation, Lebanon, to "skip like a calf." And it makes Sirion, a cluster of mountains in southern Lebanon, skip like a young wild ox."

So what makes entire countries and mountain ranges skip and jump and also makes giant cedar trees fall down?
Earthquakes?

Then we have the voice of the Lord flashing flames of fire and shaking the wilderness and causing oaks to whirl and stripping the bark off of all the trees in the forest.

Earthquakes, tornadoes, gales, hurricanes, wildfires, and, in the next verses, we add floods. But the poet is not saying that God's voice is actually in all of these things, he's saying that these are helpful metaphors for speaking about the voice of God.

The voice of God is extremely powerful and, to the uninitiated, kind of scary.

But not to those who know and love the Lord. What do they say in the midst of all this? Read verse nine again:

The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

Exclamation point! They're not scared. They're not put off by all of this. They think it's pretty cool.

Look what OUR God can do!

So they aren't disagreeing with the Genesis poet after all. They aren't saying that the voice of God is destructive and chaotic. They're saying that the voice of God is powerful and the most powerful metaphor they can think of is nature, so they compare God's voice to the voice of nature at its most powerful which is also its most destructive.

So, says the psalmist, whenever we are confronted with or find ourselves running up against the awesome power of nature – hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, you name it, just as long as it's awesome – we can think to ourselves that our God is even more powerful than that.

Creation.

Order.

Power.

These are the metaphors that we have, so far, for describing the master's voice. There are others in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is the "still small voice" that surprised Elijah when he expected to hear it in the whirlwind. There is the voice that emanates from the burning bush to Moses and the voice which speaks to him in the tent as "a friend might talk to his friend." There is the terrible thunder and smoke which comes from the top of Mt. Sinai when the people tell Moses that they want to hear the voice of God and then change their minds. There is the whisper in the night which came three times to Samuel and the dream which came to Jeremiah. And then we move to the New Testament and one more example of the voice of God is offered.

YOU ARE MY SON

Mark's version of the Baptism story is the leanest and the most straightforward of the gospels. Matthew and John draw the story out to emphasize the point that Jesus is the Messiah and not John the Baptizer. (Apparently, there was some controversy about that distinction back in the day.)

Luke has the same concern to the degree that he almost forgets to include the story of Jesus being baptized and mentions it only as kind of a footnote to his explanation of who John was and was not.

Mark, on the other hand, gets right to it and tells the story in a clean, spare way.

John the Baptizer is identified as looking just exactly like Elijah, the prophet who was supposed to announce the coming of the Messiah. Jesus comes down to the water; John baptizes him, "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

No creation, no ordering and organizing, no power here. No crashing cedars and skipping mountains, no winds and fires and floods. No, here the voice of God descends like, what? A dove. Gently. Softly. It is an embrace.

So, God's voice can be heard in the power of creation and the beautiful order of the natural world. Or it can be heard in the warm embrace of affirmation and acceptance. Either way.

The point is that we need to listen for it, to open ourselves to it, to be aware of the possibility of God's voice speaking to us at any moment of our lives, when we expect it and when we don't, when we are prepared for it and when we are not. When we want to hear it and when we'd rather not.

YELLOW CARS ARE BEST

When I was a seminary student, all seminary students preparing for ministry were required to take at least one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education or C.P.E.

C.P.E. was a hands-on experience providing pastoral care in a clinical setting – a hospital, nursing home, clinic -- any clinical setting where trained C.P.E. leaders were present to lead, teach, discuss and evaluate you as a student chaplain. As I said, the requirement was 8 credit hours or one day a week for one quarter. I took four units – one day a week for one quarter and then five days a week and two nights a week on call for another quarter.

My C.P.E. placement was at Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. My assigned floors were hematology, oncology, and orthopedics. All chaplains were also on call in the ER and ICU. I was pretty good at it, if I say so myself. I got excellent evaluations from the head chaplain and many commendations from nurses and doctors on the floors where I worked. I was able to evoke an appropriate amount of empathy so that I could relate to my patients and their parents without becoming paralyzed by my sympathy for their situation. We even had some tough situations which I managed to defuse and bring to successful conclusions sufficient that I was offered a job there when I graduated from seminary.

I declined the offer, however, because after three six months, I was emotionally drained and completely burned out. My wife was pregnant and I had seen so many burned, broken, sick, scarred and suffering children that I couldn't sleep at nights worrying about what awaited me as a parent. (People who work full time as chaplains are a special breed!)

But there were a couple of success stories, victories that buoyed me up when I was really low and about which I still look back with joy.

One of those was Jeffrey.

He was seven or eight years old and I met him on a Monday. He had come in on Friday and had not spoken a word in three days. The head nurse asked if I would go and visit him and try to get him to talk.

I told her I'd try and I looked at his chart to prepare some kind of a plan.

Jeffrey was the victim of severe child abuse. He had been tortured, probably by both of his parents, certainly by his father while his mother looked on and did nothing. His body was covered with bruises, welts, lacerations and cigarette burns. His front teeth, had been knocked out and his face lips and mouth were bruised and swollen. One eye was black and swollen nearly shut. He was undernourished and suffered from yet undetermined internal injuries. I could go on but I think that is enough.

Apparently, a neighbor had finally become fed up with the treatment she heard him receiving and called the police. Both of his parents were now in jail and he was under the care of Franklin County Children's Services. The name and phone number of his case worker was attached to the chart. She had been in to see him for a few minutes that day but he had refused to talk to her. It was all I could do to keep from crying as I read the report. I wondered what the child himself would look like.

When I walked into his room he was standing, looking out the window at the parking lot running his hand back and forth on the window sill. He was, as the chart had noted, very small for his age, probably as a result of malnutrition. It was raining and getting dark outside. A new teddy bear was lying on his pillow. He was wearing new pajamas that were stained the color of antiseptic ointment on the seat.

I walked up to him and stood beside him for a few moments and looked out the window. I wore a lab coat that was a different color from the doctors so patients and families wouldn't mistake chaplains for medical personnel. There was a cross stitched across the pocket for Christian chaplains in those days. After a couple of minutes I introduced myself.

Nothing.

I made some inane comments about the rain and the teddy bear, whatever came to mind.

Nothing.

The television in the room was tuned to a 24 hour closed circuit cartoon channel that the hospital ran and I asked if it would be okay if I stayed and watched some of my favorite cartoons.

Nothing.

So that's what I did. I sat down in the adult chair, there in the room, and I watched cartoons and, from time to time I laughed at them and I told him what I was watching. For over two hours I sat there watching cartoons while he looked silently out the window, sometimes standing, and sometimes leaning back against the side of his bed.

Eventually, it became clear that the spirit, the will, the person had been beaten out of this child. He was not going to talk to me. I was just about ready to leave and tell the nurse that I, too, had failed. In fact, I was leaning forward to stand up when he spoke.

If I hadn't just turned the volume of the television down I'm sure I would have missed it. His voice was very small and uncertain, and he said, "I like yellow cars best."

It wasn't much but, oh, my Lord. He talked! He spoke.

And, brothers and sisters, when he spoke I heard the voice of God, and since that day I have been convinced, that nowhere is the voice of God so clearly audible as it is in the silent suffering of the oppressed.

After three days of silence, Jeffrey trusted another human being enough to build that little tiny bridge of words that would allow me to cross it back to him. And cross it I did. I leaned back in that chair and reached over to the table and used the phone to call Jean and tell her I'd be coming home a little later that night. After a little while Jeffrey came over and climbed slowly, painfully onto my lap and we sat there and watched cartoons and he glided in the look on the nurse's face when she came through the door.

As I recall, Jeffrey stayed in the hospital for just under two weeks. About ten days or so and by the time he left, he was the terror of the floor. He spent much of his time visiting every other patient on the floor whose door wasn't closed, he ate all the candy and cookies at the nurses' station. He always ran to me and jumped into my arms when I made my visits to the floor and insisted that we go to his room and watch TV together. And he talked. Oh, my word, he talked. He had a southern accent, we discovered, and, one day there was a commercial on TV showing all the things a Jeep could do and he asked me what it was.

"It's a Jeep," I said. "That's a kind of car."

He nodded and thought and then he said, "You know what? I'm gone bah me one nem."

To this day when we see something on the TV that we'd like to have, one of us says, "You know what? I'm gone bah me one nem." The voice of God comes in many forms, brothers and sisters.

AMEN