

THE VOICE

1st Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, New York
Baptism of the Lord Sunday
1st Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 11, 2015
Genesis 1:1-2:4
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11
Matthew 3:1-17 (Narrative Lectionary)

Words, words, words. Our society is full of words: on billboards, on television screens, in newspapers and books. Sometimes they come in short spurts tweeted or facebooked. Words whispered, shouted and sung. Words that move, dance and change in size and color. Words that say, "Taste me, smell me, eat me, drink me, sleep with me," but most of all, "buy me." This morning you have come to church and with a sermon there are . . . just more words! With so many words around us, we quickly say: "Well, they're just words." Thus, words have lost much of their power.

Still, the word has the power to create. When God speaks, God creates. When God says, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3), light is. God speaks light. For God, speaking and creating are the same. It is this creative power of the word we need to reclaim. What we say is important. When thoughts pass from our brains through our hearts and we say, "I love you," we can give another person new life, new hope, and new courage. When we say, "I hate you," we can destroy someone. I need to be more careful with my words . . . and so do you.¹

I suspect that when you saw a sermon title printed with the words, "The Voice" you

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (HarperCollins: 2006), 11.

The voice
of the Lord
is
POWERFUL
the voice
of the Lord
is full of
MAJESTY

Psalm 29.4

surmised that the underlying theme was to be something that connected scripture to the American reality talent show, the Voice that gets advertisers to support NBC. It is something like Ted Mack's original talent show dressed up with more exciting graphics, bands and colors. The seventh season began on September 22, 2014 and ended with a finale just before Christmas on December 16. Yes, there is a program with that title, but ultimately we want to talk about THE Voice.

Years ago I little Lisa Dunlap asked her mother, Carol, "Mommy are you really the tooth fairy?" Carol looked straight at her young daughter and said, "Yes, Lisa. I am the tooth fairy. But please don't tell your little brother, we don't want to spoil anything for him and he has a lot of teeth that he will lose and will look forward to placing his teeth under his pillow and getting something special.

Several days later, Lisa asked her Mother, "Mom. Last night, how did you get into Jeanine's house?" Apparently the thought had come that her mother Carol was THE tooth fairy. And we will consider THE Voice.

It's easy to remember some of the *last words* of famous and infamous people -- you know, those last utterances before they exit the stage into oblivion. Like Civil War Union General John Sedgwick who, looking across a field at a bunch

of Confederate snipers, said to his nervous aide, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance"

But what about famous *first words*? You know, those words that launched some new venture or discovery. Sure, we remember Neil Armstrong's first words upon stepping on to the moon: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." And Alexander Graham Bell's first words spoken on the telephone in 1875: "Mr. Watson, come here -- I want to see you." But lots of other first words that signaled the beginning of important events or technological advances, while less familiar, were no less revolutionary.

Many of these famous first words, like Bell's call for his assistant, were uttered as a result of advances in communication itself. Take, for example, the first words ever sent electrically over wires via telegraph. While many others had experimented with the technology before him, Samuel Morse was the first to send a message over a real telegraph line on May 24, 1844. From the old Supreme Court Chamber in the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., Morse sent the first message -- a Bible verse, Numbers 23:23, chosen by Annie Ellsworth, the daughter of a friend -- to his associate, waiting on the other end of the line in Baltimore. The first electronic words were, "What hath God wrought?"

More first words followed as communication technology advanced. The first words spoken over a wireless radio were uttered on December 23, 1900, from a station on Cobb Island in the Potomac River by Reginald Aubrey Fessenden: "One, two, three, four. Is it snowing where you are, Mr. Thiesen?" The first spoken word that ended the era of silent movies in 1927 was Al Jolson's clever line in *The Jazz Singer*, "Wait a minute, you ain't heard nothin' yet." Dial the clock forward a bit and we read the first e-mail, sent by computer engineer Ray Tomlinson in 1971. No, it wasn't an ill-advised rant about his boss that got sent accidentally, it was just "QWERTYUIOP" -- a test e-mail to himself using only the top letters of the keyboard. The first Tweet was sent by Jack Dorsey in 2006, said, in a way that only people interested in the minutiae of life in the Twitter-verse can

appreciate, "Just setting up my Twitter."

Of course, important first words aren't confined to the advent of communication devices. The first words a child speaks, for example, are anticipated for months by parents who can't wait to hear what junior actually wants. The nine most common first words for babies are dada, daddy, mama, dad, mommy, mom, cat, no and dog.

If they say "money" first, then you actually have a teenager, not a baby.

"Let there be light"

First words announce *that something new has begun*, no matter how mundane those words may seem. And no first words, indeed no communication at all, would've been possible without the first words ever spoken: "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). The first words in the history of the universe were spoken not by humans, but by God, who utters those words at the beginning of a brand new project called creation. God's words signify a major shift from the existing formless chaos on the earth, represented by the "deep," toward order, separation, and goodness represented by God's illuminating presence. The Creator, in other words, seems to be launching a new and transformational technology just by speaking a word.

Do you recognize the name Elwood Edwards? Many of you have heard his voice every day, and yet you don't know his name. Actually, Elwood's voice is heard more than 27 million times a day. This equals more than 18,000 times each minute of the day. Elwood Edwards is the man behind those three special words (No, not "I love you") but three words that are dear to the hearts of many computer users who have a certain program to receive things in their inbox. His voice is the one that says, "You've got mail!"

In 1989, Edwards' wife Karen was working in customer service for a little-known outfit in Vienna, Virginia called Quantum Computer Services. Quantum owned the online service Q-Link. She overheard the company's CEO, Steve

Case, describe how he wanted to add a voice to the user interface. She said, "Hey, you should try Elwood."

Her husband's entire career had been in radio and TV. Edwards agreed to record four simple phrases on a run-of-the-mill cassette player. The phrases were "Welcome!"; "File's done"; "Goodbye"; and, of course, "You've got mail!"

Quantum changed its name to America Online and Edwards' voice debuted on AOL 1.0 in October of 1989 and the rest, as they say, is history.²

Imagine that--27 million times a day, someone hears Elwood Edwards' voice.

There is a cartoon of a little boy sitting under a tree with his dog. The boy is reading the Bible. He reads, "And then a voice came to Moses from above ..." He turns to his dog and asks, "Have you ever heard a voice from above?" You can see the dog's thoughts in a bubble above its head: "Attention K-Mart shoppers ..."³

Today we are bombarded by disembodied voices and background noises. Not only are we told that we've got mail, we jog to downloaded music and pod casts, elevators sing to us at work and computer generated "voices" nag us about the empty gas tank or that a door is ajar. Routinely living with all this noise, we remain susceptible to the messages shouted by these various voices. Ads on radio and television or those that pop-up on our web browser invade our ears. Is it a coincidence that randomly vicious violence and hate-filled self-righteousness become common attitudes in a culture that listens to some of our TV talk news?

It is as if we all hear voices "from above," and those voices seek to control our lives. Voices determine what we buy, what we eat, what we

expect from others, even what we think about ourselves.

Why isn't God's voice more discernible than all those other shouted sounds? Maybe our problem is that we listen to voices that sound like our own. We become enamored of our own tonal quality. It is something I fear Sunday mornings . . . too often a preacher speaking, too little a preacher listening.

Have you ever thought about the significance of the human voice?

Mystery writer Agatha Christie said that when she was young, her older sister would pretend to be an evil woman. She was convincing in this role simply by changing her voice. Agatha Christie said that the sound never failed to send chills up her spine.⁴

The power of the voice! Some of you had parents who could let you know that you had done wrong--just by how they said your name.

Erle Stanley Gardner, the famous mystery writer and creator of Perry Mason, was a lawyer himself. In his trial work, he had a partner with a rather remarkable skill. This lawyer could detect critical information in cross examination simply by listening to a person's voice. This was information that went unnoticed by virtually everyone else. In an article in *Vogue* magazine, Gardner noted that in the years that this man was his partner, when they were in court together, this lawyer made it a point not to look at the witness on the stand. Instead he kept his eyes fixed on a piece of paper, sometimes taking down what the witness was saying in shorthand, sometimes simply doodling, but always listening to the voice of the witness.

At some stage in the examination, said Gardner, his partner would nudge him with his elbow. Invariably that meant that the witness was either lying at that point in the testimony, or was trying

² *Useless Digest*, Copyright (c) 2000 All Rights Reserved, www.uselessknowledge.com/ via <http://www.witandwisdom.org>

³ Cited by Bob Olmstead, 15 March 1992, Reno, Nevada.

⁴ James Townsend, *Peloubet's Sunday School Notes* 1993-1994, (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1990).

to cover up something. Gardner said his own untrained ears were never able to detect these subtle changes of voice and tempo, but his partner could spot them with a startling accuracy.⁵

We should not be surprised that a person could read another person's voice. Our voice is very much a part of our personality. In fact, our voice is just as distinctive as our fingerprints. Be assured, nobody has a voice exactly like yours. There are voice print machines that are amazingly accurate in identifying individuals simply and solely from the sound of their voice. We are our voice.

In Emily Bronte's classic book *Jane Eyre* [pronounced "air"], Mr. Rochester is a disabled, blind man who is left alone after his mentally deranged wife sets fire to and destroys their house. His child's former governess, Jane Eyre, hunts Mr. Rochester down. When Jane finally approaches him, Mr. Rochester knows her immediately, even though he cannot see her. He says, "This is her voice."⁶

Voices are so important to our lives. Think how tragic it would be if you could never hear the voices of those you love.

The Psalmist was in love with the voice of God. And he described that voice in wondrous terms:

The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders . . . The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon . . . The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness . . . The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare . . .

⁵ Erle Stanley Gardner, "How to Know You're Transparent When You'd Like to Be Opaque," *Vogue*, July 1956, pp 45-47. Cited in Robert Bolton, Ph.D., *People Skills* (New York, New York: A Touchstone Book, 1986).

⁶ Townsend.

What a remarkable passage! The voice of the Lord is powerful, says the Psalmist, powerful beyond words. How did God create the world and all that is in it? He spoke! "Let there be light." And behold there was light. (Gen. 1:3) The voice of God--mighty beyond our comprehension. The voice of God, powerful enough to bring creation into existence and yet soft enough to comfort the aching heart.

Remember Elijah in the wilderness. Fleeing from Queen Jezebel. Despondent, certain that God had forsaken him, hiding in a cave. Then suddenly there is a mighty wind, so mighty that it splits mountains and breaks rocks in pieces, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice. (1 Kings 19:12) But that voice found Elijah out there in the wilderness, turned his life around and made him a mighty spokesman for God.

Remember Saul of Tarsus. Persecuting Christians. A zealous representative of the dominant religious class. Struck blind on the Damascus Road. Falling to the ground. Confused. Helpless. But then he heard a voice, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

And Saul asks, "Who are you, Lord?"

And the voice said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." (Acts 9:4-5)

And the voice of Jesus turned a man known for his persecutions into a man known for his passion for bringing all people from darkness into light. Saul, whom we know as St. Paul, so changed from his former life of violence that he could write in I Corinthians 13: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing . . ."

The voice of the Lord! Powerful beyond our

most fertile imaginings!

Why should we focus on the voice of the Lord this particular day? Our Gospel lesson concerns that important milestone when Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. Christendom around the world recalls this holy day as The Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Jesus, the Word made flesh, according to the Gospel of John, humbles himself and is baptized at the hands of this wilderness preacher. Do you remember what happens next? Matthew tells us,

*And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*⁷

Understand, first of all, that God speaking in an audible voice to human beings is exceedingly rare—even in Scripture. Notice in Luke's account of this event, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." These words were spoken directly to Jesus. Nowhere does Luke say that anyone heard this voice except Jesus. God speaking in an audible voice to human beings is exceedingly rare.⁸

And we can see why! The voice of God speaking to a human beings would be so transformative — as Elijah was transformed and Saul was changed.

Perhaps we should suggest that if you hear a voice telling you to do something that is not in the spirit of Jesus, that voice is not from God. We can become deluded by a voice that is not consistent with the teachings and attitude of Jesus.

But are there not those times when it seems as if God has tried to communicate with us through the quietness of our meditation, through the words of Scripture, through the prayers and great

hymns?

TV brought us Joan of Arcadia. History brought us Joan of Arc. Joan, in George Bernard Shaw's play, is asked by her interrogator about her conversations with God: "How do you mean, voices?" he asks.

She responds, "I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God."

Her questioner insists, "The voices come from your imagination."

To this Joan replies, "Of course, that is how the message of God comes to me."

God speaks to us through our imagination, through our reasoning processes, through our times of study and worship. In quiet times God speaks a word of hope, a word of encouragement, and every once in a while, a word of challenge. Many of you have heard God's voice. Not in the way I speak to us, blaring into this microphone, but in the quietness of your heart you may have sensed God's communication. And your life has been made better, because, in a time of need, you knew God was with you.

If we had read today's Old Testament prescribed text from Isaiah 42, we would have heard God speaking through the mouth and pen of Isaiah.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations . . . I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations . . . I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

⁷ Matthew 3:16-17

⁸ From *The Voice of the Lord*, a sermon by King Duncan based on Psalm 29:1-11

Idol makers tried to portray the qualities of God when they fashioned idols. But, how can you

fashion a God whose voice of self-description says "I am the Lord. That is my name."?

We can make most anything a god to be worshiped. Academic degrees, power, fame, pride, stuff - - all can become idols to be worshiped. Even other people receive undue adulation.

One Christmas Eve the telephone rang in the office of the pastor of the church in Washington, D.C. that President Franklin Roosevelt attended. "Tell me Reverend," the voice inquired, "are you holding a Christmas Eve service tonight?" When advised that there would certainly be a service that evening, the caller asked, "And do you expect President Roosevelt to attend your church tonight?" "That," explained the Pastor patiently, "I can't promise. I'm not sure about the President's plans for this evening. But I can say that we fully expect God to be in church this evening, and we feel secure in the knowledge that God's attendance will attract a reasonably large congregation."

As you are aware, my view of American life is that we tend to worship our work, to work at our play and to play at our worship. As a result, our meanings and values are distorted. Our relationships disintegrate faster than we can keep them in repair, and our lifestyles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot. (. . . Much like Pirandello's absurdist play, *Six Characters in search of an Author.*)

When God's voice speaks in Isaiah in verses like these:

Listen to me, (you) . . . who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.⁹

I read those words but can't help but think of this little ditty to remind me that as I get older God will carry me.

I like my new bifocals
My dentures fit just fine
I have my hearing aid turned up
But Lord, how I miss my mind.

It's my pride that makes me want to be independent of God. It's appealing to feel I am the master of my fate; I run my own life, I call my own shots; I go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty.

I can't go it alone. I have to get help from other people, and I can't ultimately rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a human being. So, living independently of God is self-delusion and idolatry. I can't listen only to my own voice. The Psalmist of Psalm 29 is attempting to with all these words to describe the majesty of God that is worthy of worship and to take the spotlight off ourselves.

You see, it's not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue, it's my inner psychological integrity that's at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God, and not human. My pride can deteriorate into becoming the idolatrous worship of myself, and that is becoming our national religion. It is an approach and worship that cannot hear the voice of God. It is a religion of weight and not wings and it is a faith that will require us to tote it around rather than have it carry us.

Joseph Stowell, author of the book *Simply Jesus* once asked Billy Graham what had been the best experience of his entire ministry. That seems like a difficult question for the world's most famous evangelist. Graham has preached in front of millions of people, traveled around the world many times, counseled presidents and kings. But Graham didn't have to hesitate in his answer. He replied, "By far the greatest joy of my life has

⁹ Isaiah 46:3-4 (NRSV).

been my fellowship with Jesus. Hearing Him speak to me, having Him guide me, sensing His presence with me and His power through me. This has been the highest pleasure of my life!"¹⁰

Many of you know what he was talking about. God's voice--able to create a universe, able to heal a hurt, able to turn a life around and make it whole!

A young man lost his job and didn't know which way to turn. So he went to see an older minister. Pacing about the pastor's study, the young man ranted about his problem. Finally he clenched his fist and shouted, "I've begged God to say something to help me. Tell me, pastor, why doesn't God answer?"

The older man, who sat across the room, spoke something in reply--something so hushed it was indistinguishable.

The young man stepped across the room. "What did you say?" he asked.

The pastor repeated himself, but again in a tone as soft as a whisper. So the young man moved closer until he was leaning on the pastor's chair. "Sorry," he said. "I still didn't hear you."

With their heads bent together, the old minister spoke once more: "God sometimes whispers," he said, "so we will move closer to God to hear."

Draw near to God. Hear God speak to your deepest need. Hear God affirm your life. God's voice. Is there a deeper need in our lives right now than to hear God speak words of healing and hope? Listen quietly. Listen closely. Hear God speak your name today.

BACKGROUND ON PSALM 29

The poetry of the first two verses of today's psalm is classical Hebrew poetry: brief, rhythmic

¹⁰ Joseph Stowell, *Simply Jesus*, (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2002), pp. 14-15.

strophes (lines) of approximately the same length (eight syllables each) of the repetitive pattern A – B // A – C // A – D // A – E.

Although the waters referred to in verse 3 may be the (Mediterranean) sea, it is more likely that the primordial waters of creation (cf. Genesis 1:2, "... while a wind from God swept over the waters") are intended. The storm imagery of this psalm should not be pressed for literal meteorological accuracy; the theophanic storm was no ordinary storm, so the natural referents have more than their ordinary signification.

The "voice of the Lord" (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9) is the most distinctive feature of the divine appearance in this psalm, and although thunder comes first to mind as the referent ("the God of glory thunders," v. 3), it is more likely that a shattering, screaming wind is being described ("the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars ... the cedars of Lebanon" -- thunder does not break trees but wind does).

Biblical Lebanon was renowned for its cedars, which grow to 130 feet tall with trunks spanning more than eight feet in diameter. The wood was prized for royal building projects (temples as well as palaces), not only by Israel, but by the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans also. The tall, sturdy tree dwarfs all species of trees native to Israel, making it an apt symbol of towering strength, majesty and pride. That Yahweh's voice is able to break such botanical giants is testimony to Yahweh's surpassing power.

The geographical setting for this psalm is north of Israel. In addition to the mention of Lebanon, Sirion (v. 6) is the Phoenician name for Mount Hermon (a cluster of mountains on the border between Lebanon and Syria and in great turmoil today), and the Kadesh referred to in verse 8 is not the well-known oasis in Sinai (Numbers 20:1), but rather the desert east of the Syrian city of Kadesh on the Orontes River (site of the famous battle of 1274 B.C. between the Egyptians and the Hittites).

Verse 9b serves as a pivot for this psalm,

bringing the revelation of the Lord in the storm inside: "and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'" The temple in ancient Israel, as in most ancient cultures, was understood as the *omphalos mundi* (literally, "the navel of the world"), the point at which the natural and the social, the historical, present and future, the heavenly and the earthly all connect. It would be in such a place that the realization of the thunderstorm as the manifestation of the nation's patron deity would be most likely to take place, with the appropriate response, "Glory!"

Verses 10 and 11 hold in tension the deity as originator and manager of cosmic forces and the deity as divine patron of a particular people ("his people," v. 11). The strength manifested in the thunderstorm is the same strength sought for the people of Israel, but for benign rather than destructive ends ("May the Lord bless his people with peace!"). In the pre-mechanical worldview of the biblical author, there is a seamless unity between the revelation of the deity of and in the thunderstorm, and the revelation of the God of Israel in temple worship. In the sophisticated theology of this psalm, the cosmic and the liturgical reflect two sides of a single reality.

Psalm 29 is a hymn of praise to Yahweh. The god of the Israelites is praised for power displayed. The opening verses of this psalm are also found, slightly varied, at Psalm 96:7-9 and 2 Chronicles 16:28-29. Although Psalm 29 itself is probably a late addition to the Psalter -- Charles Briggs suggests it's from the Persian period (539-330 B.C.) -- the other two biblical occurrences of a portion of this psalm are probably borrowings from it, rather than the other way around. One of Briggs' arguments for this history of development is the reference to the "heavenly beings" in the first verse (literally "sons of gods"), which is changed to "families of the peoples" in Psalm 96:7 and 2 Chronicles 16:28 (an expression found only in these two passages)¹¹.

¹¹ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, more commonly known as *Brown-Driver-Briggs* or *BDB* (from the name of its three

authors) is a standard reference for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, first published in 1906. It is organized by (Hebrew) alphabetical order of three letter roots. Students of the Old Testament have long used BDB as a primary reference and it is still a primary reference today.

