

Pregnancy, the series, #3: The Master's Voice -- John 10:22-30
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV –4th Sunday of Easter (April 21) 2013

²² At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me,^[a] is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

This is our third in this sermon series on Pregnancy, a series that will culminate on May 19, **PENTECOST**, the **birth of the Church**.

And all through this pregnancy, we hope that you will bring in your baby shower gifts and put them into the baby crib in the Narthex. We are having a Baby Shower on Sunday, May 9 (Mother's Day) for some expectant mothers, who have great needs that their financial situation won't cover.

Easter Sunday was **Conception Sunday**. Like the way it happens in life, no one talked about the conception happening in the "moment of." We just had the spectacular feel good celebration.

The next Sunday, we got the news: **The EPT strip turned blue; a baby is coming.**

Last Sunday, we talked about the importance of touch for the in utero baby.

Today, we look at the importance of the VOICE to which the baby listens.

Rachel Naomi Remen, is a doctor who tells stories about the people in her life, personally and professionally. From her book, My Grandfather's Blessings, she tells about a birth she attended early in her career.

The baby's father was a first generation Mexican-American, and a graduate student in the California university where she was working. He had married a woman from Boston, whose family had been here for several generations. Mom and Dad had attended the childbirth classes and were ready for the baby to come.

It had been a long labor, and the doctors were considering a Caesarian section delivery. But the mother was afraid of having a c-section. The father-to-be had suggested that she talk to her mother, who was back on the East Coast. While she was on the phone, he went out to the waiting room to talk to his father.

The paternal grandfather, who had come to California from Mexico many years ago, still spoke very little English. He had grown from a migrant farm worker to the owner of a small farm in the Santa Clara Valley. He listened carefully to what his son Michael told him, and then spoke a few words to him in Spanish. Michael's body language told him that he was comforted, and more relaxed.

Jennifer, having talked with her mother, had decided to allow the surgical procedure delivery. As the doctors prepared for the surgery, Jennifer rallied and gave birth to the baby by herself.

All the doctors were surprised and offered different explanations. Dr. Remen later asked Michael what he thought had happened. He explained simply:

My father is a great man. When I told him what was going on, he had smiled and nodded, saying: There was much fear. He heard about Jennifer's fear; he had seen the fear in Michael's eyes. So he knew that the baby was also afraid. Therefore, after Michael went back into the labor-delivery room, he had sat alone in the waiting room speaking to his new grandchild, in his mind. He told his grandson-to be about his many memories of the land, its dawns and sunsets, the new crops and the rich harvests. He told the baby that he looked forward to walking together on the good earth. He told his grandchild about his great love for the family. One by one, he described the new baby's relatives, describing their goodness and their strength. He shared memories of Christmases and birthdays and weddings. He talked about all the joy they took in one another's lives. Then he offered his love to the baby.

And then the baby was born.

Rachel Namoi Remen said that since that time she has attended to many births and she often suggests that expectant parents reach out to their unborn children in just this same way, sharing images of the good things to come, so that the baby is not afraid to go through the difficult birth process.

This is **something old, something new. In the New Testament, we remember that the baby within Elizabeth leapt within her womb when he heard the voice of Jesus' mother. (Luke 1:39-45)**

In a CNN story written by Annie Murphy Paul in December 2011, this new field is called "fetal origins." It's turning pregnancy into something hitherto unknown: a scientific frontier. "What it adds up to is

this: much of what a pregnant woman encounters in her daily life ... is shared in some fashion with her fetus. [All this input] makes up a mix of influences as individual and idiosyncratic as the woman herself. ... By attending to such messages, the baby learns the answers to questions critical to its survival. Will it be born into a world of abundance or scarcity? Will it be safe and protected, or will it face constant dangers and threats? Will it live a long, fruitful life, or a short harried one?"

What the mother tells her unborn child can have a profound effect on how the baby's life will be formed, the science is telling us.

I am always delightfully amazed when the science of today and tomorrow catches up with what uneducated peasants have known for centuries, but which we sophisticated people think is mere superstition.

When I was visiting with _____ (and her daughters) at the Hubbard Hospice House, attending to the pending death of one of her daughters, the topic of pregnancy came up. One of her daughters told me about a pregnancy where these very same issues arose:

There was a young couple in their mid-20's expecting their first baby. When the mother-to-be went in for a prenatal doctor visit, she told the doctor that she really wanted her baby to grow up to be polite. The doctor said that she should rub her belly at the same time each day and tell the baby of her desire.

That is what the mother did. The eighth month of pregnancy came and went, without issue. Then the ninth, with no issues, except that there was no delivery. The same continued for the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth months. The situation never resolved. When the woman died at the age of 75, she still had not delivered. An autopsy was performed. As it turns out, she had been carrying twins, and the autopsy revealed two 50 year old men still within her, saying to one another, "You first." "Oh, no, I insist, you go first." "On no, please, you go first."

Our Father in Christ, the Rev'd Mr. **John Wesley** used the notion of the baby in the womb to describe what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Wesley wrote that ***the Kingdom of Heaven is all around us. He said that it is like a baby in its mother's womb. Our earthly existence is like being a baby in its mother's womb. All around that baby's mother is the Kingdom of Heaven, which is like all the world around the pregnant woman. It is so close, and only separated by a thin membrane.*** Wesley concluded that *while the baby is content in the moment with life within the womb, so are we content with the life around us. Like the baby is reluctant, and sometimes*

*afraid to **go through the difficult birth process** so too, we are sometimes reluctant and afraid to go through that doorway we call death into the next stage of our life in the Kingdom of Heaven, unfettered by these earthly bodies.*

Jesus talked about the importance of knowing His Voice. He said that His Sheep really do. Whenever I read this passage, I think about the publicity photo that RCA Victor used, which I printed in the bulletin, of Nipper the fox terrier listening to the sounds coming out of the megaphone of the old record player. The tag line of the commercial was: "His Master's Voice."

I also am reminded by this scripture of MY METAPHOR for what it means to go through that doorway we call death.

On the other side will be a cacophony of sound – sounds the like of which we have hitherto unknown. Heaven is just a few steps away, but in the darkness of eternity, and eyes not yet accustomed to seeing in it, along with the confusion of all the noise, who knows how long it will take to find our way over to those pearly gates"? Yet, if we know the Master's Voice, as soon as we go through the doorway, we will hear Him call us by name and say, **"Welcome, Monty/your name. Turn to the left and take my hand, and we will walk into your new home with all the saints. Come, the banquet is prepared."**

It's so very, very important for us to each hear and know the Master's Voice. It will shape our life here and beyond, just as the talking that we do with the in utero baby.

But it takes time and practice to know the Voice of the Shepherd of Life, who speaks in a language of Silence.

We must needs spend much time in silent prayer until we know it, until we can distinguish it from all the other voices that are clamoring in our own heads.

In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus' antagonists complaining that Jesus is not being clear. These are the same folks who will later accuse Him of blasphemy and call for His crucifixion.

There's an old proverb which says: **If all you have is a hammer, then all of the world looks like a nail.**

All these religious authorities had an ear for was people causing trouble. They made a lifetime of fault finding. There are still some in the Church today like that.

They were unable to hear Jesus' Good news. They were unable to hear His Voice as sheep hear the Good Shepherd's Voice.

Perhaps, too often in the Church today, we only hear Jesus' Voice in somebody else's language, and not our own.

We hear of Jesus as some **“true God,”** or as **“personal savior,”** or as **“lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world.”**

We do need some “official Jesus language.” But we also must have some connection with Jesus in our own language, our own hearing. Jesus cannot be real and only be an idea captured by other people's words.

We must know him personally. His story must be part of our own personal story.

Otherwise, Jesus is just a good idea. Otherwise Jesus' Voice is not one we know. All we know will be the voice of other people who claim to know Him.

An old Jewish teaching story may be helpful:

When Rabbi Zusya grew old and knew that his time on earth was nearing a close, his students gathered around him. One of them asked him if he were afraid of dying.

“I am afraid of what God will ask me, said the Rabbi.

“What will He ask you?” inquired the students.

“He will not aske me, ‘Zusya, why were you not like Moses?’ He will ask me, ‘Zusya, why were you not Zusya?’”

We must learn the Master's Voice, like sheep know their Shepherd's Voice, or we will not have the relationship necessary.

We need to be speaking words of hope and love to the baby so that the Baby will also not be afraid of the Shepherd's Voice.

I have a baby for each one of you. Put it in your pocket or purse.

- It's just a reminder to you and me of the pregnancy we are studying.
- It's just a reminder to you and me of the reality of the pregnancy that is part of our lives
- It's just a reminder to you and me of how important for us to be still and to listen to the Master's Voice

- It's just a reminder to you and me of how important it is for the baby what we are speaking.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.