

THE VOICE OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10:11-18

I don't know about all of you, but I don't have a great deal of experience with sheep. I've pet some at petting zoos and seen some at the Royal Winter Fair. During a trip to Iona, Scotland I got to see new lambs jumping and frolicking while out at pasture. And once I even got to bottle feed a lamb. But that's about all of my real life experience with sheep. And I've certainly never met a shepherd—at least, not the kind of shepherd whose lived reality is tending to actual sheep every single day.

Shepherds and sheep were common in Jesus' time. The people who lived back then had everyday experiences with sheep. Even if they didn't work with those animals directly, they still would have seen shepherds at work each day, moving sheep from their pens out to pasture or to a watering hole; they would have drank sheep milk and eaten sheep cheese, and eaten the meat of the animal; they would have worn wool clothes made from the sheep's coats. And they would have used sheep in religious rituals, as well. Which is part of what makes shepherds and sheep a good metaphor for the people of that time; even if they fished for a living or were carpenters or were part of higher society, they knew about shepherds and sheep in a fairly direct and intimate way.

And though we today are not as broadly knowledgeable about how to care for sheep and lambs, or how to shear sheep for wool, or how to make sheep milk or cheese, or how to butcher a lamb, many of us have learned something about sheep and shepherds throughout our journeys as Christians. We see images of Jesus as a shepherd in stained glass windows and in Bible story books. We hear about the goodness of shepherds from prophets in the Old Testament and, perhaps most recognizably, in the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd." We sing hymns and listen to choral music that features shepherds and sheep. We hear Jesus referred to as "The Good Shepherd" and learn that he is willing to lay down his life for his beloved sheep.

Something that distinguishes sheep from say, cows, is that they know how to follow their shepherd, their caretaker. While cows need to be prodded from behind in order to get them to move along, sheep will follow the voice or call of their shepherd; they listen for and come to their leader when called. And this is an important distinction to make because, as we heard Jesus say in our scripture today, there are other voices out there that aren't likely to stick around when things get difficult or when danger presents itself. The sheep need to know which voice to trust, which voice leads to safety and care. The "hired hand," who may look like the shepherd or even sound something like the shepherd, entices us to follow. But the reality is, the hired hand doesn't really care for the sheep and will run at the first sign of danger or conflict. The reality is that, in our daily lives, there are so many other voices that compete with the voice of the Good Shepherd, that vie for our attention and ask us to follow. These voices are persistent. These voices are alluring. They speak of things that peak our interest, be it ways of making money, or building success, or acquiring the latest tech, or engaging with the latest trends, or influencing others. And while those things aren't necessarily bad, the

voices that lift up those alluring elements of everyday living would like us to believe that putting those things at the centre of our lives will lead to a rewarding and happy life. But the Good Shepherd knows differently. What can appear wonderful and rewarding on the outside can lead to darkness and despair. A wolf in sheep's skin, if you will. So, with all these competing voices, how are we to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, the voice of Jesus?

Many of us want to hear Christ's voice, but we can't quite make it out—we get confused about which leader to follow and to whom we belong. But we have to remember that the sheep aren't born instantly knowing the voice or call of their shepherd—they learn it over time by hearing it again and again and by following the ways of the other sheep around them who they know and trust. Our experience of listening for or hearing Christ is likely similar. It's not something that is instant, it takes time and thought and heart and living within a community of other followers who can help show us the way to listen and hear. It means hearing the gospel proclaimed as we gather to worship. It means asking questions and seeking wisdom. It means accepting that sometimes we'll listen to the wrong voice—the voice that leads us into darkness instead of light, away from God—but realizing that we are always being called home by the Shepherd who loves us and knows us. And as long as we can identify that Shepherd's voice, we will be okay.

Hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd also means recognizing that there are so many ways that God speaks to us and to others. It may be through a Bible passage, or through a particular song, or in conversations with others, or through prayer. It could be through a great podcast, or in a well-written article, or through a really good book. It may be through beauty, or mutual love, or forgiveness when we're not sure we deserve it. It could be in a completely silent moment, where everything is so still that the voice of God is the one sure thing you know is coming through. And we can know we hear the Shepherd and not another voice because there are some distinguishing features of the Shepherd's voice.

One feature of the Shepherd's voice is that the Good Shepherd always speaks of hope. Hope is one of the foundations of our faith; with hope we have reason to keep going, to keep learning, to keep growing, to keep praying and singing and gathering in community. With hope we can grieve and hold sorrow and be vulnerable, too, because God meets us even in the darkest places. Hope lifts up and moves us from darkness to light. If the voice you hear focuses on brokenness and shame and despair and death, it's probably not the voice of the Shepherd.

We will also hear about forgiveness from our Shepherd. We know of the power of forgiveness through Christ who was arrested, betrayed, put on trial, hung on a cross, and died, yet did not come back to seek revenge or to shame those who turned against him. Forgiveness is a powerful thing for all of us as we journey and seek healing, reconciliation, and wholeness. And yet, so many voices today speak of hatred and revenge and choose to shine a light on our differences in the hope that they will keep us apart. If the voice you hear promotes an "us verses them" mentality, it's not the voice of the Shepherd.

The Shepherd speaks words of truth. Now, they may not be words we like or particularly want to hear, because the truth being told may be related to the way we are living and acting and thinking. They may be words that sink under our skin and make us itch because the truth can be uncomfortable; they may make us realize that we've been complacent or self-serving or unkind—that we haven't cared about ourselves or our neighbour or God. If the voice only tells you how amazing you are, or only tells you how awful you are, it's not the voice of the Shepherd.

Finally, the Shepherd will always speak of love. Loving God and loving one another are the most important commandments of our faith. The Good Shepherd shows us the ultimate love by laying down his life for us. And we know love is powerful because, through Jesus' resurrection, that love has not died or dwindled or been cast into the darkness; that love moves out and through us all. If the voice you hear wants to share love, but only in exchange for something else, it's certainly not the voice of the shepherd.

If we're open to listening and hearing, then God has the power to break through the din of other voices that shout and entice and confuse, and lead us with words of hope, forgiveness, truth, and love. And as we follow that voice, we are called to share it with those we encounter each day: to use our own voices and actions in ways that reverberate out into the world, to start something good that ripples outward and keeps rippling as more and more people echo that voice.

When we gather with the children each week for Sunday School, something we repeat is that there are many ways to talk to God and one of them is by singing. We sing together. We sing songs that teach words that we use in our faith tradition, words like "hallelujah" and "peace" and "light" and "love". Our children are building a faith vocabulary one song at a time.

The song we've been singing for the past couple months has some very simple lyrics: "clapping our hands we sing hallelujah, sing hallelujah, clapping our hands." And, as you may guess, we clap our hands as we sing. And when, last Sunday, I repeated the line I always say, "there are many ways to talk to God and one of them is by singing," one of our kids piped up immediately and said "Hallelujah!"

One parent told me that one day while colouring at home, her daughter was trying to sing the lyrics, clap her hands, and colour all at the same time. The joy of that song filled her in some way that made colouring alone just not enough—she needed to sing and clap, too.

And we have another little guy who will be the first to tell you that he can sing "Go now in peace" faster than anyone else can. It may not be the most peaceful way of hearing the song, but he has found the way that it connects best with his active and creative mind.

In fact, "Go now in peace" is the song we close our time with every Sunday with the kids. While the depth of the meaning of the word "peace" may not be one that all our young kids understand yet, it's a word that will grow with them. It's a word that they

may ask questions about in the future as we encourage them to wonder. As these children learn and grow they will continue to sing, echoing the words they learn on Sunday into their lives on Monday. What about the rest of us? We come, we listen, we learn, we process, we absorb; do we then take the words we hear Christ speak on Sunday into our lives on Monday? Do we try to sing and clap while we also do the laundry or cook a meal? Do we repeat what we've heard at work or at school or at dinner or on the golf course? Do we sing God's praises? Do we echo the voice of the Shepherd?

There is another element to the shepherd's voice that we heard in today's scripture. Jesus says "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). While the Shepherd is invested in the welfare of each individual sheep and knows us all by name, he is also invested in the flock as a whole—the entire community. Forming an authentic and holistic community is not a straightforward or simple task. As one commentator puts it: "we dole out parts of ourselves in stingy bits and pieces, avoid being vulnerable with each other, hold back our feelings and thoughts, are afraid to confront each other... Our good intentions are misunderstood and rejected and we avoid commitments because we do not want to risk exploitation or abuse." So, with all that in mind, how do we overcome those perceived threats and form a community that is life giving, loving, and hope-filled?

The voice of the Shepherd lets us know that our fears, uncertainties, and anxieties are real, and that it's okay to be vulnerable with one another. God's community is inclusive. Jesus didn't exclude people based on the expectations of the day, he openly embraced those who were blind, weak, vulnerable, marginalized, and sick. He didn't follow the standards of the time and only pay attention to those of high status and good lineage in excellent physical condition. Jesus' call for one flock doesn't mean uniformity and sameness; that would ultimately lead to exclusionary practices that aren't what the voice of the Shepherd calls us to. Rather, the flock is beautifully diverse. And the gathering of the flock doesn't rest on our shoulders—Jesus states that he and the Father will bring the sheep to the fold. What we need to do is provide a welcoming space for those sheep; a place of belonging.

As we continue the work of forming a loving, supportive, authentic community, may we also keep our ears open to the voice of the Good Shepherd. May we feel secure knowing that there is never a time when the Good Shepherd isn't on duty, ready to guide us as we seek to follow. And may that understanding bring us reassurance that, in turn, gives us the courage, the spirit, and the song we need to allow the Shepherd's voice to speak through us as we reach out to and journey with a diverse range of others along the way. Amen.