

“Knowing the Voice”
Psalm 23; John 10:2-6, 11-16
Fourth Sunday of Easter, (April 25) 2021
Good Shepherd Sunday
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Some years ago, a friend told of visiting churches in the Czech Republic and Eastern Europe. One night there was a dinner with Christian students and pastors from many of the old Soviet bloc of Eastern European nations.

Several of visiting pastors from Eastern Europe talked about the challenge of their churches facing capitalism – a different kind of secularism from old Communism but secularism, nonetheless. A veteran pastor said in the old days, the issues seemed to him more clearly delineated. You knew, he said, that at every church meeting there were members of the secret police present. Often even those who called themselves “ministers” would really be spies. He paused, “But even those spies were careful never to betray their true identities, we could always tell who they were.”

“But how?” someone asked.

“The voice,” he replied. “The voice. Something in their voices would give them away” (L. Gregory Jones, *Everyday Matters: Intersections of Life and Faith*, p. 189).

The voice. Their words might be smooth and well-chosen, but there was

something – perhaps indefinable – that made them recognized as untrustworthy, as deceptive, false. A wolf in sheep's clothing.

That's interesting to me. These days when there is so much religion, and American White Evangelicalism screams its rage while beating its chest about Jesus, I want to know what's the difference with a Christianity that also talks about Jesus but acts with love? What's the difference? How do we recognize the difference in sheep and wolves in sheep's clothing? More than that, how do we know the voice of the true Messiah, the true Christ, from all of the false messiahs, and pseudo-christs?

Jesus says in today's lesson, "They are like sheep who will not follow a stranger, because the stranger's voice they do not know. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd, and they follow only him." In other words, true sheep, because they belong to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, respond faithfully to the sound of his voice and his voice alone.

In verse 3 and 4, Jesus says, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

When I was in Israel a few years ago I watched shepherds and flocks of sheep follow much of same habits they have since biblical times. From reading, I've learned that at the end of the day, shepherds bring their flocks to a common watering hole after the sheep have spent the day grazing at various pastures. Around the watering hole, eight or nine flocks may be there at the same time and

all of the sheep get mixed up. The shepherds do not worry, however. When it is time for each flock to go to its night pasture, each shepherd sounds his or her own distinctive call – a special trill or whistle, a particular tune on a particular reed pipe – and that shepherd’s particular flock withdraws from the mixed-up crowd and follow their shepherd to their home pasture. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd’s voice and it is the only voice that they will follow.

An old teacher of mine said he knew of an outstanding preacher, a fast climber on the ladder of success, who was visiting in another church, preaching for them one weekend. Even though it had not been announced, everyone knew he was being looked at as the prospective next pastor of the church. He was good. He had them laughing, had them crying. He was creative and told stories that made the sermon come home right to the listener. He was handsome and charming. Knew how to say just the right thing at the right time.

Afterwards, crowds came forward to try to shake his hand and greet him. But one elderly woman went over to one of the elderly deacons. “We’ve got to pray for that preacher,” she said.

“Well, you’re right about that. But why do you say that?”

She said, “He’s got some problems.”

Now this elderly Christian woman had no idea that in a nice hotel room just a few miles away, the preacher had brought a woman under his wife’s name, who was not his wife (see *Craddock Stories*, p. 97).

How did the elderly woman know? I'll tell you how she knew. This woman had known the Good Shepherd for many years, and she could tell his voice from a stranger's voice.

These last few Sundays we've been together outside, I've thoroughly enjoyed watching our children. This past year, our flock has been separated and socially distanced, but we're looking ahead at regathering and I'm especially attentive to our days with our children, and that we raise them in a way that they know and recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.

You know and I know, this old world is full of a cacophony of voices shouting for our children's loyalty, and for our loyalty. Buy me, you need me, it's all about me, I'm the center of the universe, there is no such thing as society, there is only me, and I'm on my own, vote for me, do it for me, be all you can be, I gotta be me, just you and me babe, I'm on your side, I'm on the Lord's side, they're bad, we're good, they're anti-God, we are people of faith, they are a threat to my liberty, he doesn't love you, I'm really the one who loves you, come on, you'd do it if you loved me.

Somehow or another we have to hear the voice of Jesus through all of that clamor. How do we do that?

Part of it, of course, is familiarity. Our children can be in a room surrounded by voices and faces and all kinds of noises, but when their mother's voice is heard, that particular child will turn her head and brighten at the sound of the one voice

most familiar, the one voice most trusted, the one voice most intimate.

To know the voice of the God we know in Jesus – we have to spend time with him. Prayer, Bible reading, serving others in his name, and gathering in worship with others who go by his name. **And I think it is especially important for us to keep finding ways to be with others who are different from us, who go by the same name, so we can learn to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd together.** We can't recognize the voice if we are not accustomed to hearing it, if we're not familiar with it. How do you know it? Well, you'll know it when you hear it – if you practice listening to it and for it.

And I know this, when we hear his voice, it will be the voice of love and mercy and grace. The voice of Jesus is the voice of justice and peace, of patience and goodness. When we hear voices of bitterness, of hatred, of mean-spiritedness, of spite and strife, and any calls to violence – any! – then that is the voice of a stranger. Don't follow it! Don't follow any voices that call you to be less of who God created you to be. Don't follow any voices beckoning you to small-mindedness, pettiness, and any that put-down others. If the voice speaks hatred and division, do not listen to it! Don't do it!

But there is more to what Jesus is saying to us. Jesus is in a debate with religious leaders who do not recognize him as a shepherd, and further down in chapter 10, he says to them, “You do not believe simply because you are not my sheep. My sheep know me, know my voice, and believe. You're not in my sheepfold, so of course, you don't believe” (10:26-27).

It is interesting that Jesus doesn't say that you are admitted into the flock if you believe or that you are kicked out of the flock if you don't believe. No, he says that, if you're in the flock, you're one of his. You believe because you're in the flock. You hear his voice and know him, and he knows you and won't let you go.

We put a lot of emphasis on what I, as an individual believe or do not believe. Much of it has to do with our modern sense of making choices. I choose Jesus or I do not choose to believe in Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't say anything like that here. He just says his sheep hear his voice and he knows them, and they know him. They're in the fold just on the basis of hearing his voice.

As I look out at you, all of us gathered under our church sign that is the Good Shepherd's staff, that's just about all of us, no matter our doubts, questions, or reservations we may harbor about all of our Christian beliefs. We sit in the fold. We're in the flock. You may not have your head straight on every part of the Bible or understand all the doctrines and teachings of the Church. But you are here, in the flock, the fold.

Your individual choices and individual beliefs and doubts may not be the main point. The point is, you're here. You have heard the voice of Jesus and you have come forth; you have come into the fold. Somehow you have heard something that sounded in some way like the voice of God, the voice of the Good Shepherd, inviting you to come forth and be part of this gathering, this flock. And that's enough, says Jesus, for him to keep you, to keep you for good. **Perhaps it's**

not all about what you believe or not or what you choose or not, but more a matter of what the Good Shepherd believes and chooses? It's his voice that keeps drawing us here. And it is here, in this flock with its shepherd's staff sign, that we find life, and hope, and grace, and the love of God.

We want to learn to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and know it when we hear it. We want to be able to discern the voice from other, competing voices calling us to hate and to carry guns. We want to train our children to discern to voice of the Good Shepherd. At the same time, there is more going on here than just us. There is grace here, beyond our own determination, that says the Good Shepherd is at work, too. It's not all up to us and our choices. It's in the hands of the Good Shepherd.

A church in North Carolina has a drama group who performed Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* the weekend before Christmas. Different members of the church worked long hours transforming the fellowship hall into nineteenth century London.

When the audience came in and were handed their programs on the night of the performance, everyone was amused to see that playing tight-fisted Ebenezer Scrooge was none other than a veteran member of the church with most un-Scrooge-like generosity of spirit and gentleness of heart. This man was highly respected and loved, but here he was growling "Bah! Humbug!" through the play.

In the final scene, the transformed and jubilant Scrooge flings open his bedroom window upon the street below. He cries, "Me-e-e-ery Christmas!

Everyone! Me-e-ery Christmas, everyone!” Then, wishing to bestow Christmas gifts to the needy of London, and looking for someone to help him, he acts as if he sees a kid on the street down below, “Hey you, boy, you there!” the laughing and joy-filled Scrooge shouted. He pointed at an imaginary figure, “Come up here, boy. I’ve got something wonderful for you to do!”

What happened was unexpected. When he called, “Come up here, boy. I’ve got something wonderful for you to do,” a five-year-old boy in the audience, a little boy from the church, who was with his family in the audience, spontaneously rose from his chair in response to this jubilant and generous call from this man who truly was jubilant and generous in the church. The boy walked on stage ready to do “something wonderful.”

The actor playing Scrooge blinked. Everyone paused, not knowing what to do. Everyone held their breath. Then the man of faith came through the veneer of Scrooge and came down from his window perch, strode across the stage and embraced the waiting and smiling boy. His voice full of blessing, he embraced the boy and said, “Yes, indeed. You are the one, the *very* one I had in mind. Yes, you are going to do something wonderful.” As he spoke to the boy, he walked back toward the audience where the parents were waiting, and the boy jumped into his father’s arms and they went back to their seats. Then the play resumed until the end. When the curtain calls were held, as you can imagine, the little boy who had felt himself personally summoned from his seat, along with old Ebenezer himself, received the audience’s loudest and warmest applause.

You see even though the clothing was different, the little boy knew the voice

of the Good Shepherd in that man. A man who was truly jubilant and generous and gentle. So, when this man called, the boy answered the call (from Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p. 106-107).

We want to be people who listen and hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. And when we hear it, may we get up from our seats, ready to do something wonderful. And we will hear the voice say, “Yes, yes, you are the one, the *very* one I had in mind.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.