

Listening for the Shepherd's Voice

Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

April 12, 2008
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have it on the best authority from a seminary classmate of mine who grew up in southern Virginia—in fact, grew up on a sheep farm—that sheep are neither the most intelligent animals, nor do they possess good eyesight. These are two crucially important factors to know, especially if you are a sheep farmer, as my classmate's parents were. Dennis knew from the time he was a young child on that sheep farm that sheep need someone to guide them. Sheep are prone to wander, so someone needs to help them arrive at a good grazing area. Or a place where clean, fresh water may be found. Or a location that is safe and secure from predators, where they might rest and be refreshed. They need a sheep-herder, a shepherd.

When I think of these things, I begin to say to myself, “Well, I guess I'm kinda like a sheep . . .” I'm not referring to my lacking intelligence, although my eyesight is pretty bad in general. I'm referring to my latter words—that we are a needy people prone to wander, and that we need guidance and direction, as much as we need rest and refreshment, and as much as we need to feel safe and secure. It has always been that way for human beings, hasn't it? No wonder then, that the image of the shepherd is such a visible and compelling one throughout the entire Bible, both Old and New Testament. Shepherds, both good and bad, and sheep, needy and lost, are pictured in a variety of places throughout scripture. And every year, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we lift up the image of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd, and all our scripture points us to that wonderful image and truth.

In fact, every year on Good Shepherd Sunday, a portion of the 10th Chapter of John's Gospel is used—this year's portion being the first ten verses. That chapter contains John's account of Jesus describing himself positively in comparison with false shepherds, with wolves, thieves, and strangers. He alone is the Good Shepherd.

Now, a critical component here is what makes and continues the relationship between a good shepherd and his sheep, and thus, between Jesus and his disciples. The critical component is that the shepherd knows the sheep, and the sheep know the shepherd's voice. Jesus says that the shepherd will call them by name (because he knows them), the sheep will hear the shepherd's voice, and then the sheep will follow him because they know his voice, and it is a voice unlike the voice of a stranger. This critical point is mentioned more than once in our Gospel lesson today, and it's reiterated later on in the 10th chapter, in verses beyond what we read today.

But there's little doubt that we live in a world flooded with all kinds of voices calling to us, demanding our attention. We live in a world where the cacophonous noise of things threatens to overwhelm us, and snatch us from living out God's purposes and plan for us. It can be difficult hearing Jesus' voice in the midst of all the other voices that reach our ears. And there are indeed

the voices of thieves, bandits, strangers and wolves who give the appearance of being sheep-herders, but in reality tempt us to go astray, and suddenly we find ourselves far from God.

There's the noise of mindless entertainment that clutters our lives. Our daily dose of news consists of which starlet is divorcing whom and having whose child, or who got rejected on *America's Next Top Model*, or how did Simon Cowell insult that performer on *American Idol*. We know more about the lifestyles of the rich and famous than we do about our own neighbors, or about our Lord, for that matter. The voices of our pop culture are very loud, aren't they?

Or, how about the voices that speak right in our ears some days? The project our boss gives us at 4:55, and he tells us it was due yesterday. The incivility of someone who cuts ahead of us in line. The needed home repair for which we hadn't budgeted. The unwritten expectations of friends or family that become burdensome. The nagging physical ailment we just can't seem to treat. The derision from our teammates or coach or fans when we miss the goal, miss the free throw, strike out, whatever our particular failure happens to be at that given moment. The words we hear late at night when we can't sleep that tell us we'll never be able to afford college for our kids, or retirement for ourselves, or resolve our dilemmas, or find contentment. Those voices can send us completely off course. Those voices can determine our attitude about the world, determine how we treat others, determine what we think of ourselves and what we believe is our future.

But Jesus obviously understands sheep-herding and sheep. When my seminary friend, Dennis, talked about his family sheep farm in southern Virginia, it was totally in line with Jesus' words. Dennis said that not only did his family's sheep graze on certain hillsides around his home, but neighboring sheep farmers also had their sheep on the same hillsides, grazing in the same area. So, here are all these sheep, just munching away together, and then, at day's end, the sheep herders would come out and call their sheep. Each shepherd had a unique call. And the sheep, as unintelligent as they were, and with as poor eyesight as they possessed, knew their master's call, knew their master's voice. Dennis said it never failed to amaze him just to listen and watch as sheep headed in their various directions, toward the sound of their particular shepherd, who was calling to them and gathering them, prepared to take them safely home.

Throughout John's Gospel, and really, throughout New Testament scripture, we hear that Jesus is the one to follow. It's his voice we need to hear, listen to, be guided by, for life. It's his voice that will offer provision and care, direction and a home, safety and peace. Jesus says he came to our world that we might have life, and have it abundantly—both now and in a glorious life to come. And the Church has been given the awesome task of being the place and the people where Jesus' voice might be spoken and heard. Where his life-giving words will be accessible to us and others. Where his voice can penetrate and cut through the other voices we hear each day, set us on the path he would have us go, and bring us into hope and out of fear and despair.

So I am glad you are here today. Because here at last is where our Lord's voice rings loud and clear. Here is where we can trust we will come to know his voice, it will become familiar to us, as we learn not only about Jesus but also learn from Jesus how he wants his disciples to live out this discipleship. That's powerful reason enough to gather together in worship regularly—just to get to hear and know his voice. But don't forget the other part of the equation. Remember that it

is the Good Shepherd who also knows his sheep, wrote John. Jesus knows us because we have been baptized in his very name.

Several years ago, there was a billboard locally—I think it was out on routes 11/15—there was a picture of a sheep on the billboard, the sheep was clearly branded on its flank. I seem to recall the ad was for name-brand outlet shopping, but I loved the words which said, “Do you have the right brand?”

Do you and I have the right brand? Yes, we do. In our baptisms, Christ marked us with his cross forever. When I make the sign of the cross on the newly baptized person’s forehead, it is the symbolic moment where we say we bear the mark of his cross on our brows. We bear the mark of his willingness to lay down his life for us. We are his, because he has claimed us, and now proclaims he knows us and calls us his friends. That’s his brand—it’s his brand of love, and no one and nothing can snatch us up out of his hands. **AMEN.**