

Hearing Voices

Psalm 23, John 10: 22-30, Revelation 7: 9-17

While today is Mother's Day, it is also Good Shepherd Sunday. Sometimes the lectionary, the prescribed or recommended readings for a given Sunday that was picked out years and years ago, happens to be just what we need. Considering two years of pandemic, political violence, failed legislation, ongoing war...We need a calm Shepherd, whose voice we recognize, who knows the name of each sheep, who carries a rod and staff that comfort. We get all that and more in Psalm 23 which we read together, Revelation 7, and John 10.

Jesus tells us that sheep listen for and recognize the voice of the shepherd when they speak. I learned about this growing up on a dairy farm. However, with cows rather than sheep. When the cows were in the pasture and it was time to milk, we had a call that went like this: Go, go, go, go, go, go, go. Come on! Come on! When our cows heard this call, they knew it was time to come into the barn. Now, what was interesting is that each farm in the area had their own unique call. The cows listened for and recognized only the voice of their farmer and returned to their barn when they heard their call!

Parents soon realize there are different kinds of cries from their children. Some cries are tired whines; some are intended to get attention. Parents learn to tell the difference between a cry of physical pain and the cry of hurt feelings. An attentive parent knows the sound of their child's cry.

Of course children also know the voices of their mothers and fathers. Sometimes an "I love you" is heartfelt and sometimes it contains a bit of distraction. Sometimes a yell is in anger, sometimes it is impatience, and sometimes the shout is more about fear.

The voice of the Shepherd that we hear this morning is a voice that knows us, that reassures, cares, protects, and guides.

In the gospel of John, Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who opens the gate for the sheep. Later on, Jesus says he himself is the gate to the sheepfold. As sheep, we are to follow the sound of the shepherd's voice which we will recognize. We are assured that the good shepherd cares so much for the sheep that he will put himself in danger to protect the sheep. The hired hand would not do such a thing, but the true shepherd will not run when the wolf approaches.

Jesus says all of this earlier in chapter 10, verses we did not read today. Nor did we read the response by some of the temple authorities. "He is demon-possessed, and raving mad! Why listen to him?" (John 10:19).

Sheep herding was not new to Jesus' listeners, it was part of their lives. It was also part of the religious imagery that the people knew. Psalm 23 is in the Jewish canon - which could be why the religious leaders were so incensed. Who is this young rabbi to call himself "the shepherd"? He may be a descendant of King David the shepherd, but he is a carpenter rabbi. And a crazy one at that. That scene ends. That's John 10:1-21.

In the next scene, (the text we read today) was a new day and place. It was Hanukkah, time for the feast of the dedication of the Temple. It was the time when the Jewish people remember the story told in I and II Maccabees, when there was oil enough for the lamp in the temple to be lit for only one night. Yet miraculously the lamp stayed lit for 8 nights.

John gives us all these details: winter, Hanukkah, Jesus walking in the Temple - on Solomon's Porch, the place where King Solomon would have traditionally rendered judgment on those who were pleading for justice. This was the place, this was the time when the Temple Authorities once again came with their questions - or were they taunts: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

At least some of the Temple authorities heard Jesus' previous long speech about sheep and shepherds. And some of them deemed him crazy. But here they are - asking again, who he is?

Earlier in John 10:15-16, Jesus says: "I know my sheep and my sheep know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen – I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:16).

Notice how Jesus is reassuring, inclusive, merciful – willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

However, in the scripture we read this morning, when that question comes – "Are you really the Christ" – now there is frustration, exasperation in the calm shepherd's voice; his answer was not so gracious.

"You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." This is Jesus "the gate", closing the door on those who do not recognize his voice, who do not follow him. This is Jesus "the protector", keeping the sheep he knows safe and keeping the sheep he does not know out of the sheepfold. He is clear that the sheep that belong will not be snatched by the wolf or thieves. They will be with him and with God...That's Jesus/God the gate...

However, I prefer that earlier shepherd – the one who is willing to lay down his life for the sheep, a shepherd who is reassuring, inclusive, merciful. I want to be near God who knows peace, who is peace, who leaves peace in his wake. How about you?

We hear lots of voices today, don't we? Voices that give information, voices that give inaccurate information, voices that are scared, voices that are angry, voices that are devastated, voices that are full of mourning. We witness many of our countries leaders –

so many of our church leaders - that seem to have closed their ears to the voices of the people, to the voice of God...

When Christianity, when the church is reduced to listening to leaders advocating the securing, maintaining, and enforcing of political power, that is the moment it stops having anything to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. How will those, whom politicians legislate for exclusion and hate, ever come to know, forgiveness and redemption of God, through Jesus Christ, if the church is following the politicians lead, or worse leading the pack!

John 3:16-20: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him... This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed" ...

While, as I said earlier, I prefer the shepherd that is willing to lay down his life for the sheep, the one who is reassuring, inclusive, merciful, there are times when I want a shepherd like the one Jesus becomes in the passage we read this morning – a shepherd who says, "I did tell you, but you aren't listening, I am shutting you out" ...I want God the gate! The gate is shut!!...

While preparing this message, I was reminded of the Oklahoma City bombing back in 1995 when anti-government, white supremacist, right wing terrorist Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols bombed a federal building killing 168 people, including 19 children, and wounding another 680...The case is closed – the jail door shut. One has been executed; the other serving 161 consecutive life sentences.

Despite the level of violence and devastation they caused, I still question closing the gate on those two terrorists...I wonder, does God know their names? Did they think they were

hearing God when they planned such devastating violence? Do I want “God the Gate” to shut them out too? Is it only God who can be the gate?...Can the sheep close the gate on other sheep? Are we to shut the gate on others? What about mourning? What about forgiveness?... Remember the Nickel Mines incident, when Charles Carl Roberts took hostages and shot ten girls (ages 6–13), killing five. It seemed that mourning and forgiveness occurred simultaneously in those Amish families. What voice were these families hearing? How does one learn to be a sheep like that?

In Jesus’ metaphor, he is the shepherd, we are the sheep. But if we step back from this metaphor and into another...we are also called to be the hands and feet, and in this case the voice, of Christ. “And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them” (1 John 3:23). “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24)...

We cannot hear it often enough, that we are loved, that we are part of a family larger than this one gathered today. Perhaps if McVeigh and Nichols and Roberts had known that they were named and loved by God they would not have needed to make themselves known in such violent ways. What about the unprecedented numbers of killings in Philadelphia? Perhaps if those on the streets had someone to call them by name, to show them the love of the shepherd, maybe, just maybe, they would be less likely to pull the trigger...

The good shepherd’s voice is not the only one we hear in these texts this morning. In Revelation there is a great crowd shouting and singing:

“Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!...Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever!”

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These are voices from every nation, every language. In this vision there is no longer any reason to worry about the Temple authorities or the violence and terror of the Empire, the State. Here are people from absolutely every place under the sun waving palm branches and singing in freedom. These are not palm branches waved in anticipation of a military triumph like some may have wished for when Jesus entered Jerusalem. These palms are waved because there has already been triumph. The Lamb is with God - what more can be done than to sing in thanksgiving?

It is not a simple, easy solution. It is not a short term band aid. Joining with others, singing in gratitude, naming each other in love. It is a lifetime of work, it is our life's work, to be the joyful, loving voice of God for others, naming and passing peace to all we meet. It is this work that unites us with God, that makes us one with God. Shepherd and sheep together. Peace be with you. Amen.