

"Hearing the Shepherd's Voice"
John 10:1-10

May 11, 2014

4th Sunday of Easter

Good Shepherd Sunday, which is observed every year on the 4th Sunday of Easter, is a beloved observance for many in the church. Why? In favorite Biblical texts and beloved hymns we remember the kind and caring image of Jesus as the gentle shepherd who simply loves and cares for all the sheep. We also like to conjure up warm and fuzzy images of us as cute little sheep and lambs who are good and kind and willingly bask in His love and care. But neither of these images is entirely accurate.

In Biblical times, sheep were not necessarily considered to be good and kind. Sheep were dumb animals that wander off and go astray. This could happen if they were shepherd-less or if they listened to deceptive voices and sounds that could lead them astray. When that happened, those sheep would end up outside of the sheep pen and dead, either due to starvation or by the devouring of nearby wolves. Therefore, it was essential to listen to the voice of the shepherd, follow him, and enter into the safety and protection of the sheep pen. To do anything else would end up in death for the sheep.

In this way, we are like sheep. We are not good and kind by nature. We have sinned. We have wandered away from the safety of the sheep pen. As Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray." (Is. 53:6).

We have ignored or refused to listen to the Good Shepherd. We have listened to other voices. There are so many voices in our world today which are calling for our attention, our trust, and our commitment. Some of these voices may be inherently bad – the voices of immoral morality, false religions, world views, or belief systems. But many of these are voices of neutral things or good things – the voices of sports, technology, entertainment, school, jobs, money or possessions. These

voices only become bad when they lead us away from our Shepherd and to themselves; from the safety of the sheep pen to the danger of the desert.

The sad thing is that many people today don't even know they are listening to someone or something other than the Shepherd. They don't know that they are following someone or something other than the Shepherd. They don't know that they are headed away from the sheep pen and out to the desert.

The saddest thing of all is that the false and deceptive voices to which all of us are tempted to pay attention and to which many are listening are leading people to destruction. Many sheep who are so busy listening to so many false or deceptive voices will find themselves slowly starving to death outside of the sheep pen. Eventually, the roaring lion – our adversary, the devil – who has been prowling around will devour such sheep.

Shepherds in Biblical times loved their sheep. They called each sheep they owned by name. Shepherds would get in front of the sheep and lead them in love. They would not stand behind the sheep and drive them by force. Shepherds were quite dedicated to caring for them and their needs. They would make sure that sheep had adequate pasture and clean water. Shepherds would lead them through the dangerous desert, protecting them from wolves and other adversaries, until they arrived safely at the sheep pen. Sometimes, the shepherds would give up their lives in defending and protecting the sheep, but that would be by accident. They planned to live for their sheep, not die for them.

Jesus is a different kind of shepherd all together. He is no meek and mild shepherd as He is often portrayed. He describes Himself in the verse following the text where He says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) Jesus does not simply love His sheep in some vague and emotional way. Jesus shows His love in action by sacrificing Himself for you. He does not passively die for you, but He actively lays down His life for you and all other sheep. This was no accident. Jesus planned, not to live for Himself, but to die for the sheep. ‘

In this way, Jesus could gather a herd of sheep for Himself. He brought back wandering sheep through the forgiveness of their sin and made them His own. He has called each us by name – His name given to us in our baptism – and leads us in love rather than driving us by force. He cares for our needs, both physical and spiritual. “He makes [us] lie down in green pastures. He leads [us] beside still waters. He restores [our souls]. He leads [us] in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” (Psalm 23:2-3)

But, more than that, Jesus rose from the dead – came back from the grave to life - that we “may have life and have it abundantly.” This is not just a better life now as we know it here in this earthly wilderness. While such a life may seem appealing and many pursue it, Jesus has something better in mind for us – something better than we can even imagine. He is leading us to an abundant life in the heavenly sheep pen.

And so our Good Shepherd leads us right up to the door of the sheep pen and then says, “I am the door for the sheep.” Jesus is not only the shepherd who leads us to the sheep pen, but He is also the entrance into that sheep pen. You cannot get into the heavenly sheep pen on your own – by your own effort of faith or moral accomplishments. Neither can any of the voices, good or bad, to which you listen can get you into the sheep pen. If those voices are what you are paying attention to, committing yourself to, and trusting in, you will be left out of the sheep pen. Jesus is very emphatic when He says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Jesus has taken up your sins and laid down His life for you. By the forgiveness earned there, He has made you His sheep and a member of His sheep pen. Jesus has taken up His life again for you and shares with you the abundant life of the resurrection. He not only leads you to the entrance to that abundant life, but He Himself IS that entrance.

So listen to the Shepherd's voice. This may be a better translation for "the sheep hear his voice" in our text. It is not simply that the sheep hear the sound of the Shepherd's voice. Anyone can do that. Jesus' sheep listen to the content of the Shepherd's voice.

This is, first of all, a statement of fact. His sheep listen to His voice. The opposite is also true. Those who do not listen to His voice are not His sheep. They may *think* they are His sheep or they may have their names on a sheep list somewhere but, apart from hearing the Shepherd's voice, they are not His sheep.

Secondly, and more importantly, this is an invitation. Hear His voice. One of the saddest things of all which breaks a pastor's heart is when people become angry or indifferent when this invitation is extended as if hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd is an unpleasant duty which must be endured or an unimportant activity which can be overruled by other voices. Hearing the shepherd's voice is not a duty to be done but a gift to be received.

Once, when many disciples were leaving Jesus because they felt it was too hard to understand Him or follow Him, Jesus asked the Twelve if they wanted to leave also. Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68) Jesus, our Good Shepherd, speaks to us words of life which we cannot get anywhere else. Jesus' words remove guilt and condemnation and give forgiveness and life.

So where do you hear the Shepherd's voice? It is not in the subjective voice inside of ourselves which could be anyone's voice, but it is in the objective Word of God which is the voice of Jesus Himself. We hear Jesus speak through the voices of undershepherds of the flock – pastors whose very title means shepherd in Latin. As Jesus said to the first shepherds, the Twelve, "The one who hears you hears me." (Luke 10:16) Pastors are sent by Jesus to speak His Words to His sheep that they may be comforted with the Shepherd's love and prepared to follow Him.

Follow the Shepherd. Where do you find Him so that you might follow Him? Some will say, "Jesus is everywhere and so I can be with Jesus anywhere." That is true – to a point. Jesus is

omnipresent – everywhere – but He has also promised to be specifically somewhere and that is here in Divine Service. He has promised, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matt. 18:20) As we gather together in His name, here is where we hear the Shepherd’s voice as His undershepherds read and proclaim it.

Jesus has located Himself on our altar in, with, and under the bread and wine. Here is where we are fed and nourished with the Shepherd’s body and blood so that we might be strengthened and renewed to follow the leading of the Shepherd outside of our sanctuary.

Follow Him and His voice throughout your lives outside the sanctuary. This is not easy. There are many voices of strangers out there, seeking to do you harm. How can we avoid those subtle, yet destructive, voices? Jesus says, “The sheep follow him, for they know His voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him for they do not know the voice of the stranger.” The more you hear the voice of the Shepherd here, the better you will follow Him out there. If you don’t hear the voice of the shepherd regularly here, the more apt you are to listen (and be deceived) by the voices of strangers out there.

Even if you faithfully hear the Shepherd’s voice and follow His leading, it won’t be easy out there. There is always suffering in following the Shepherd. But this should not surprise us. Peter says in our epistle lesson for today, “For to this (suffering) you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21) The Shepherd suffered greatly for us and so shall we in following Him.

But we do not look down and focus our attention on the pain and suffering that occurs in this life, either because of our sin or because of following the Shepherd. That is how we lose track and get lost. Instead, we keep our eyes on the Shepherd and upon the destination to which He is leading us: the heavenly sheep pen. We have no fear or worry about reaching our final destination successfully, but only joy and confidence. For the One who is leading us TO the heavenly sheep pen is Himself the Door INTO the heavenly sheep pen.

He will bring us through and into the abundant resurrection life which He has promised us. As bad as this life is – and it is bad because of the pain, the grief, the suffering, and all of the bad things that come with living in a sinful world or for faithfully following the Shepherd – the abundant life that is awaiting is so much better that we cannot possibly even imagine it. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.” (Romans 8:18)

Good Shepherd Sunday is a good Sunday, not because of our preconceived notions of what shepherds and sheep are like, but because of what Jesus has done for us and has promised to us. Hear the voice of the Good Shepherd who has called you by name. Follow the Good Shepherd where He has promised to be and along the path where He is going. Enter into the abundant life which the Good Shepherd has won for you and gives you freely. And you will enjoy perfect peace, perfect joy, and perfect contentment for all eternity. Amen.