

Sermon 5/3/2020

This, the fourth Sunday of Easter is called Good Shepherd Sunday. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells his followers that he is the gate for the sheep. In the verse that follows the lectionary selection, verse 11, Jesus says; "I am the good shepherd." According to a quick Google search, there are 43 verses in the Bible that mention God as a shepherd, including our Psalm for today, the 23rd Psalm. Sheep are mentioned more than 500 times in the Bible, more than any other animal. Before settling in the Promised Land, Abraham was a shepherd. He and his descendents would move their flocks from place to place in search of pasture. Shepherds come to name their sheep and their flocks know the shepherd's voice. Jesus' reference to sheep and shepherds harkens back to Abraham and may have served as a familiar illustration for early Christians.

In our industrialized society, some might have trouble relating to Jesus as a shepherd, I know I do. All I know of shepherding is the Buggs Bunny cartoon with the sheepdog clocking in for his shift. I have never seen shepherds in action, and have only seen a real flock of sheep when I visited Stonehenge ten years ago. Stonehenge sheep are quite unbothered by tourists. Curious, I went to YouTube to find videos about shepherding. One video in particular featured two girls who

tried to get a shepherd's sheep to come to them. The sheep were afraid and clearly wanted nothing to do with the girls. Even when their shepherd called to them, because there were strangers close, the sheep were wary. Another video showed several students trying to call a flock of sheep. Predictably, the sheep ignored the students, but when the farmer called them, they ran towards him. The sheep knew the shepherd's voice. *"...and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."*

How do we know God's voice? I imagine it's like knowing your parent's voice when they call you to come inside. My husband knows when his mother is calling him, versus calling his dad who has the same name. God spoke directly to Moses and Samuel. In the books of Daniel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the Revelation, "a voice came out of the heavens." I confess that when I read accounts in the Bible of God speaking to someone, I am envious. It would be much easier, I believe, if God spoke to me in words that I could actually hear, like taking a phone call. I've heard God speak to me, actually speak, twice in my life. The first time I was alone in my room, reading the Bible because I had nothing else to read and was bored. God spoke to me then, and I believe I heard him because I was still and silent. The second time was about eight years ago, during Holy Week. I was here at the church for my hour of the Overnight Vigil, when we

take turns sitting with Jesus before Good Friday. It was late, the church was utterly silent, the altar stripped and the simple wooden cross was leaning against the altar. I asked God a question and God answered. I heard the words clear as day. While I treasure those moments, it's not like the conversations I imagine Abraham and Moses had with God.

Hearing God's voice involves active listening. Writers talk about voice within their writing and a good writer will have a distinctive style that is unlike any other and is often cultivated over years of writing, their voice. God has a distinctive voice, but we must study God's voice so we can weed out competing voices. Recognizing God's voice also involves instinct. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells his followers that sheep will not follow a stranger, that they will run from him because they don't know the voice of strangers. How many times have you heard someone speaking, or found yourself in a situation that just didn't feel right. That gut feeling can serve as a guide.

As Christians, we must study God's words and speak to God in order to hear God's voice. Through Jesus, the gate, we are called by God. A shepherd will name his sheep and call them by name to fertile pastures. In the words of the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in

green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake."

How have you heard God's voice calling to you? In addition to hearing God in deep silence, I also God's voice near moving water, at the river or near the ocean. During this quarantine and time of isolation, perhaps you have more time to devote to prayer and are hearing God speaking to you. Are you spending more time outside and hear God in the chirping of birds? Or are you finding God harder to hear? God is calling each one of us by name. Take some time this week to pause and listen for God's voice. How is God calling to you?