

“Knowing the Voice”
 delivered Sunday, April 25, 2010
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 Psalm 23, John 10:1-11
 Installation of Elders

Most of us assume, I imagine, that in the animal world, sheep are not among the brightest of God’s creatures. So it’s no small wonder that Psalm 23 and the familiar cadences of John 10 are so well-known and deeply loved, because the benevolent image of God as the Good Shepherd automatically casts us in the role of God’s sheep.

According to shepherds, however, there are some distinguishing characteristics about the nature of sheep that are worth our consideration in light of the scripture. One shepherd, who has thought about Jesus’ use of these images, says that it’s worth noting how sheep are moved from place to place. While cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, that will not work for sheep at all. Stand behind sheep making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. Sheep tend to grow fond of their shepherds. A shepherd can walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step foot in the fold without causing pandemonium. Sheep seem to consider their shepherds part of the family, and the relationship that develops between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to. A good shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure; while the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue means food, or a two-note song means that it is time to go home. (1) Real life sheep know the one to whom they belong; they recognize their shepherd’s voice, and that is the only person they will follow.

The community of John’s gospel struggled to discern the voice of Jesus Christ among all the voices that clamored for their attention. John’s church was made up of Jews who believed in Jesus and at first exercised that belief within the synagogue. They were eventually cast out of the synagogue and found themselves in intense conflict with other Jews and with Gentiles who did not go through Judaism on their way to being Christian. Trying to be faithful to Christ in the midst of conflict that was not only religious, but social and political as well, the author of John’s gospel is clear that faith in Jesus Christ is essential to participate in the abundant life Christ offers here and now. Christ is the shepherd whose voice is recognized by the sheep. Christ is also the gate of the sheepfold through whom the sheep may enter into safety and protection. Thieves and bandits will seek to enter by another way and take the sheep, and lead them astray. But amid the dissonance of conflicting voices, the gospel declares that God’s sheep are able to recognize, and to follow the single voice that can be trusted.

Now, the exclusive claim of this text – that some belong in the fold and others do not – must be handled with care. Theologian, Donald Dawe, has written, “When we use John 10 in preaching and teaching, we are standing at the heart of Christian faith. It is a place of power...and of peril. If we misapply this text, we will only end in sanctifying our prejudices and in vilifying people different from ourselves. If we apply it aright, we will speak a liberating word for those whose lives cry out for a center other than themselves, or the idols the world is so ready to supply.” (2)

We are painfully aware of our need for this liberating word, in our world in which the voices clamoring for our attention are sometimes deafening. I think of 15-year-old Phoebe

Prince, of South Hadley, Massachusetts, who some have described as being bullied to death. Her tragic suicide revealed how she suffered verbal abuse in her school's hallways, and was tormented by posts on Facebook encouraging her to kill herself. I wonder if she – or others whose suffering is like hers – could have heard more loudly, and known more clearly another voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd, *then* perhaps these young lives could move in a more hopeful direction. The same could be said of her tormentors – what is the voice around which they are centering their lives? That is just one small example, albeit a tragically public one, of thieves and bandits getting away with God's sheep.

We have heard them too: voices amid a culture that says you have to look like this, or do that, or be this to fit in; voices that call out saying, "Buy me, use me, vote for me, believe in me....if you only had me – your life would be complete." In our world, as in the early church – perhaps even more-so today with our explosion of technological and media exposure, we know what it is like to hear a multiplicity of voices. The challenge of the church, of being in Christian community with one another, is to discern, and to know, and to listen for the voice of God. How do we do that? It happens in community with one another, right here in church – as in no other place – where we regularly gather around the word of God, and attend to the presence of Christ in one another's lives.

In a few minutes, we are going to ordain and install elders, elected by you to serve this congregation. They have engaged in a season of Elder Training which included reading one of the gospels from start to finish in one sitting, in order to begin this service with the whole life and ministry of Jesus in view. They prepared written statements of faith which included what they believe about who God is and how they have come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior. They have studied the Constitutional Questions they will be asked this morning in detail so that they can respond to them with understanding and integrity. They have each shared an aspect of their faith journey with the session and explained why they feel called to assume this role of servant leader at this time. And this whole period of study began by gathering in prayer around this word of scripture from 1st Peter: "I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge."

So today, they will take up that mantle of servant leader, with a lot of responsibility for overseeing the ministry and mission of Shandon, which is a huge undertaking for this vital and vibrant congregation. Could there be any word of scripture more appropriate to their installation than this one which reminds us, that our primary calling is to know the voice of God?! And, to lead the members of this church to recognize that dependable, trust-worthy, life-giving, voice amid all the other voices we hear.

It is the tradition in many Episcopal dioceses that once a year, priests and lay leaders of the church come together and renew their ordination vows. One wise, long-serving priest in a small town in Tennessee said, "Forget coming together to renew our vows. What we should really do is come together to repent!" (3) I suspect what he meant was not just intended for church leaders – but for all of us. For our Christian calling is to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, to fashion our lives according to the life of Jesus. That is a high calling for each of us, to trust in the riches of God's grace, and then to remember that the final act of grace is to make us gracious. It is a calling not one of us can undertake alone.

What keeps us faithful is to know and recognize the voice of the One who calls us. If in our own times of distress and pain, when we are not sure we can take one more step forward, we hear that familiar voice saying: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." Or when our faith has faltered and our vision grown dim, if we can tune our souls to resonate with that voice

reassuring us: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you.” Or at those times in our lives when we become uncertain of life’s purpose, confused about what makes life good and true, if we can just remember the echo of that voice calling us anew: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Even when we stand on the rim of death’s canyon, staring with grief into its depths, if we listen carefully to that voice again: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live...”

Amid the flurry of voices that fill the world – voices of bitterness, judgment, hatred and strife – here – in a common fold with one another – we come to know our Shepherd’s voice. It speaks to us – compassionately, mercifully, lovingly, commandingly, and hopefully. “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” We are well led if, here in the church – as in no other place – *that* is the voice we come to know, to trust and to follow. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Voice of the Shepherd,” The Preaching Life, p. 140-141.
- 2) Thanks to Mary Jane Cornell of my Lectionary Group for this Donald Dawe quote from Lectionary Homiletics.
- 3) Martha Sterne, Alive and Loose in the Ordinary, p. 32-33.