

²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah,^[a] tell us plainly." ²⁵Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.^[b] ³⁰The Father and I are one."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Revelation 7:9-17 pg 249 NT

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;

the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,

and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

“Recognizing HIS Voice”

Muppy. Fritzy. Sandy. These are the names of 3 Schnauzer dogs that the very gentle, calm and mild-mannered Catholic Priest, Fr Michael Renninger, describes as *“the most hateful dogs to ever walk on God’s green earth”!* On a helpful sermon video series that I listen to on occasion, Fr Renninger tells a funny story about having been a young priest in training when he encountered these dogs. They belonged to the Bishop with whom he was living. They were Fr. Renninger’s absolute nightmare. *“They barked,”* he says, *“all the time. They barked when they got up – at 4:55am every morning. They barked when the phone rang. They barked when someone came to the door. They jumped on the furniture. They jumped on people. If I left a laundry basket full of clothes on the floor, I’d come home to find my shirts all over the house – with holes in them where they’d chewed on them like a toy.”* Fr Renninger wanted to PUNISH Lucifer, Satan and Beelzebub as he liked to call them, *“but since they belonged to my boss,”* he says, *“I couldn’t do anything that would leave a ‘visible scar’.*” So, he came up with a plan. He’d noticed that every afternoon, at exactly 4:30pm, the Bishop would come home to let the dogs out. The Bishop would put his key in the door, walk in, and yell, “Oh, Hi guys!” (He had a very recognizable voice – one that Fr. Renninger could imitate well). And when he’d do this, the dogs would come running, and he’d give them each a doggie treat. So, one afternoon, Fr. Renninger carried out his ornery plan. *“At 4:15pm, I came home,”* Fr Renninger says, *“put MY key in the door, walked in and said the magic words: “Oh, Hi guys!”* And the three dogs came running. *They barked with joy as they ran down the steps. They turned the corner, and then....they stopped....utterly confused. They looked at me like, ‘You’re not the right person!’ (It was wonderful!). When they’d left, I stepped into the cloak room and whispered, ‘I’m in here, guys!’ They came running again...then froze when they saw it was me. (It was great). I went into the kitchen. The floor had just been waxed. I yelled, ‘I’m out here guys’ They came running. They got half way into the kitchen. Then they tried to stop, but the floor was so slippery that the little devils crashed into the cabinets. Boom, Boom, Boom. (Excellent!)”* For the next two weeks, every day at 4:15pm, Fr. Renninger repeated his prank, getting his revenge on these dogs who’d eaten his shirts and woken him up at 4:55am! But then, something

changed, the day came that nothing happened. *“Oh, Hi Guys”*....Nothing. (*repeat*). The hateful schnauzers remained asleep on the floor. Ten minutes later, the Bishop came through the door. He called out to them with exactly the same words and they went running. *“I realized,”* says Fr. Renninger, *“the dogs had figured out how to tell the difference between my voice and the bishop’s voice. For a while, my imitation was close enough to confuse them, but then they listened so that they could tell the difference between their master’s voice and the voice of the terrible young priest who was trying to trick them.”*¹

Well, recognition of his voice was what Jesus was talking about in his conversation with “the Jews” in our gospel text for today. *“It was winter,”* John writes. While it indeed may have been cold outside, scholars believe that John was referring to not to the weather but the spiritual environment, for there was a real chill between those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah and those who had nothing but hostility for him. These people, “the Jews”, felt that the coming Messiah would be a military leader who’d relieve their oppression under the Romans, using whatever force was necessary. Their feelings were especially intense now, on the anniversary of the ancient battle when Judas, the Maccabean, drove the Saleucids out of Jerusalem. It was the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) when all Jews were remembering the victory over the enemy who had vandalized the Temple so long ago.²

Jesus was walking in the Temple, in the portico of Solomon, where decrees of justice had famously been handed down. “The Jews” confronted him. They asked him to tell them PLAINLY if he was the Messiah or not. His answer was that the proof was in the pudding...the works that he had done testified to who he was. He was the One who was giving sight to the blind, healing the sick, bearing God’s caring authority to the world. He referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, and he said that the people who knew this fact were the sheep of his flock. They were the ones given faith to know him as good, rather than wicked, like those wicked shepherds of Israel, described in Ez 34. They were the ones who knew that the world might be saved through him. They were the ones who would be given eternal life and could never be

¹ Michael Renninger. *“My Sheep Hear My Voice”* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmdwxjhN9E0> (accessed 5-9-19).

² Roberto L Gomez. *“I Know Them”* www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3750/I-know-them (accessed 5-9-19)

snatched from his hand. And they were the sheep who heard and recognized his voice, amidst all the other voices in the world.

Now, in making this last point, he was referring to a scene which would have been familiar to his audience. In fact, even today, it is common to see Bedouin shepherds let their flocks huddle together at night, often around the same watering hole. Sometimes the shepherds build a makeshift pen around their mixed-up flock. One shepherd might lay down at the entrance as a “gate”. Then the shepherds separate out their sheep again in the morning by simply whistling or calling their sheep’s names.³ The sheep recognize their particular shepherd’s voice, and follow him out. Their shepherd is the only one they will follow because he’s whom they’ve come to trust. He’s proven his care for them, his protection of them, his constant companionship, his ability to lead them to places of nourishment and rest. They follow secure in the promise that he will continue to hold them fast.

The imagery was clear for Jesus’ audience that day, and it is clear for us too. Jesus did not rise from the tomb to stay silent.⁴ He is alive to give us guidance and purpose and direction and truth. And if we listen for his voice, if we listen with the “ears of our hearts”, with the faith given us by God, we will hear it over all others, and receive a life that has a quality of heaven, an eternal life. Our life will be characterized with a peace that passes understanding, one that rises above the turmoil, worries and stresses of the world, which is not necessarily abundant in years or in wealth, status or accomplishments but abundant in love, love for others.

The challenge for us is this.....listening with the “ears of our hearts” is not always so easy. The distractions to hearing Christ’s voice are enormous, and the imitators and deceivers out there are pretty good. Voices presenting “truth” sure sound really different. (e.g. FOX or MSNBC, CNN or BBC, politicians on the left, on the right, preachers of the prosperity gospel or gospel of suffering)? They’re confusing and sometimes actually claim to speak for God, telling us we need some prescribed religious experience, like speaking in tongues, or that we need to believe the “correct” doctrine, or grow to a higher level of knowledge or morality or

³ Barbara Brown Taylor. *“The Preaching Life”* (Cowley Publications, 1993).

⁴ M. Renninger.

ever material gain. They are pretty proficient at evoking fear, often demeaning, and at making demands of us, and at offering empty promises. Elizabeth Johnson says it well, *“The voice of the Good Shepherd never requires a proper status, or right experience or accomplishment. It does not say, ‘Do this or do that or believe this way or that and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep.’ It liberates rather than oppresses. It says, ‘You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand.’*⁵

I love the witness of Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt regarding two situations of the Shepherd’s voice that she saw being experienced in the very same week.⁶ *One situation occurred when she met with a family at a funeral home following the death of their mother. When she asked the family for a scripture that they’d like read at the service, they could not think of one, but they felt that likely their grandmother would know, their grandmother...the deceased woman’s mother. “She was the more regular church-goer,” they said. “The grandmother was tired, her body just spent, when she arrived, having endured a long drive. She had no thoughts on the matter of favorite scripture either. But by the afternoon she had rested and regained her thoughts. Her bright eyes glistened as she said to me, ‘I don’t know where it comes from in the Bible, but I want this one: ‘I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where my help comes...’ And so, we read Psalm 121 at her daughter’s funeral the next day.”* The second situation occurred later that week when Rev. Hunt visited a 2yo in the hospital. *“Hospitals can be such frightening places for anyone, but especially for little ones who can’t make sense of all the machines and procedures. However, this little girl wasn’t crying but singing. She was in her pajamas, with a sleeve wrapped around her arm’s IV site to protect it, and there was a pulse oximeter on her big toe since her fingers were too small to hold it. The song she sang was obviously one she was making up since the words were jumbled, but it was a sweet little melody, even so.’ Rev Hunt immediately knew that the girl was reflecting a home filled with love and care.” She concluded that in the first situation, the grandmother, in her grief, was asking to hear again the promises that her Shepherd’s voice had whispered in her ear her whole life long, and the little*

⁵ Elisabeth Johnson. “Commentary on John 10:22-30” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id+2813 (accessed 5/10/19).

⁶ Janet H. Hunt. “Our Shepherd’s Voice” words.dancingwiththeword.com/2013/04/our-shepherds-voic.html (accessed 5/10/19).

girl, singing her soft melody through her pain and fear, was already hearing her Shepherd's voice, through the voices of those who loved her and protected her in her earthly home.

Friends, you and I may not hear Jesus' voice as an audible one, but instead through a nudge in prayer, through strong intuition, through thoughts that persist, or through a sense of peace that fills us when we consider one option over another....we may hear it more clearly in times struggle and more plainly through friends than on our own, but one thing is for sure, we will recognize the voice of the Shepherd, above the cacophony of other voices...**we will recognize it as being different and true** when we are encouraged to:

- trust rather than be cynical
- celebrate others more than self
- be true to our word rather than lie or break promises,
- be generous with of our money, time and talent but also with our joy and laughter
- offer hospitality and invitation to ALL, to everyone
- be creative, imaginative and hopeful
- be a peacemaker and a justice-doer
- forgive rather than hold grudges or spread gossip
- be grateful in all things

We will recognize the voice of the Shepherd when we are told that we are deeply loved, that we need not fear, for our Lord will make us to lie down in green pastures and lead us beside still waters. He will restore our souls and lead us in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he will be with us, his rod and his staff will comfort us...Yes, this is the voice that when we hear it, we can follow it and then live as his sheep, secure in his hand, and yea, dwell in his house forever. Amen.