

## John 10: 1-18

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me<sup>a</sup> are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

<sup>11</sup>"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes<sup>b</sup> it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Ezekiel 34: 11-16

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"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the fountains, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and upon the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on fat pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice.

## *The Shepherd's Voice*

*When I read the text, I can't help but think about something I've seen so many times...parents coming to pick up their children from marching band rehearsal, swimming lessons, soccer practice, some large church gathering and simply standing at the edge of the field or pool or whatever and hollering their child's name. I've marveled at this. But I've marveled even more when somehow the child(ren) hears their parent's voice and comes running. "Zach, Nate", a tired mother might call, "we're going", and amid all the noise and out from the throng, Zach and Nate suddenly come running toward her and follow her out. None of the other children even look up from their activities. Only Zach and Nate recognize her voice as the one which matters. They've been hearing it since before they were born.*

It is the same, I understand, with sheep and their shepherds. In fact, in the Mid-East, even today, the scene described in today's text still regularly plays out. Bedouin shepherds go into a community sheepfold each morning and call out their own flock. They call them each out with little pet names... like "Baby" or "Lovely" or "Beauty"...And the sheep recognize their own shepherd's voice and come. They are listening for the one whom they trust and to whom they belong. They are listening for the voice that matters, the voice of the one that they've heard from before they were born. These shepherds will then move the flock. Sometimes, they get out in front and call the sheep to follow. Sometimes, the shepherd may drive the flock from behind, letting his voice push them in the direction they need to go.

While I cannot speak from experience with sheep, I understand that they are really quite beautiful creatures. They are very social, for one thing. Their identity is to be part of a community, a flock. In fact, they need each other, cuddling up in a heap each night and moving together as one during the day. Their "flock mentality", the force which makes them all do as the others do, is one of the strongest in the animal kingdom.<sup>1</sup> While a little skittish, they are also quite playful, often seen to romp around a bit with each other, especially the lambs. There are rumors out there that they are, however, not extremely intelligent animals. In fact, they do not

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<sup>1</sup> Anon. "Don't Count Sheep." <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/2430> (accessed 4/23/21).

seem to spend time thinking about too much! But this may be an admirable thing for instead of worrying, they focus on and are happy doing what is essential for the day: eating, caring for their young and resting. They are not born with claws or sharp fangs for hunting or protecting themselves. Nor are they camouflaged for their environment or equipped with internal GPS systems as some animals are. So, they are vulnerable and dependent creatures who will overgraze a field if not moved frequently, who can easily get caught in fast running water, who are prone to get lost and wander into dangerous territory.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John Gospel, we read a lesson with beautiful imagery, a word picture, of Jesus as the True shepherd of the sheep, the one who *“calls his sheep by name and leads them out”*. We, humans, are, in this lesson, the sheep. We are the sheep, the ones who are vulnerable and dependent creatures who need community, who need to be led and are prone to get into trouble. We are the sheep, who need listen to the Shepherd’s voice, to hear him call our names, and follow him. And we are the ones who need recognize him by his voice. Five times in chapter 10, there’s a reference to the importance of listening to the voice of the shepherd.

Now, Jesus warns us that there are bandits, thieves, strangers, false ones who threaten to steal our attentions and mindsets. They are voices that we should not listen to. In Jesus’ time, these were the religious leaders of his day...the Pharisees who, in their piety, were insisting that the only way to God is by strict adherence to the plethora of man-made rules and regulations. They were the ones who, in their self-proclaimed righteousness, attempted, for instance, to drive out the blind man due to the sin they believed was associated with his being born that way. Possibly too the false religious leaders for Jesus were the revolutionary zealots, some of whom were claiming themselves as Messiah and trying to lead Israel into confrontation with Rome.

I think we need ask the question, *“In our time, who are these false leaders? Who are these voices that we should not be listening to, that threaten to distract us. Who are they who create for us a cacophony of noise trying to drown out the voice of our shepherd?”* T.S. Eliot once said, *“No place of grace for those who avoid the face. No time to rejoice for those who walk*

*among noise and deny the voice.*”<sup>2</sup> Right. Well, while I think they may be different for everyone, to ME the false leaders in our culture include those who are in positions of power and religious leadership who misuse Scripture for their own agendas. These people I observe misusing the Church or the pulpits that stand behind to “cherry pick” the Word and twist it to fit what they desire... their political or nationalistic motives for instance (i.e. wrapping religion around the flag). They also use it improperly to justify their material wealth, often called the prosperity gospel. There are also those too who, while not be in positions of religious leadership, preach another message...one of hatred, violence, fear and exclusion of others. While it is very heartening to see people, particularly the young, rising up to speak with great wisdom against these voices, it is also disheartening to see how many others follow the ones who do not testify to the truth, who are against, anti-Christ, propagating more hate and violence.

Brothers and sisters, we, who belong to the Truth, need listen amid this noise for only Jesus’ voice. We have heard it since before we were born. We will recognize it as the one that speaks to us a promise of comfort and assurance when we are frightened, of protection and provision when we are sick or lost, of gentle forgiveness when we have sinned, and of orientation and direction as we need go forward.<sup>3</sup> We will recognize it when we hear a message with encouragement in its tone, love in its lilt, and strength and upbuilding in its tenor. We will most assuredly know it by its message. Quoting Ezekiel 34... *“I, myself, will be the shepherd of my sheep, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice.”* Yes. We will know the voice belongs to the true Shepherd, if we but listen. We need not even see his face to know him. Barbara Brown Taylor quotes a sheep rancher who says that *“he was always amazed that growing up, he could walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of the sheep, but a stranger could not step one foot in the fold of sheep without causing pandemonium.”*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot. Quoted in Kenneth Kovacs. “A Familiar Voice”. <https://catonsvillepres.org/sermons/a-familiar-voice/> (accessed 4-28-23).

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Kovacs. “A Familiar Voice”. <https://catonsvillepres.org/sermons/a-familiar-voice/> (accessed 4-28-23).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. “The Voice of the Shepherd,” In: The Preaching Life. (Arkansas City: Cowley:1993), 140Y-141.

Yes, we can discern the voice of the true shepherd from that of a false leader, even amid the noise by listening for the tell-tale signs of truth, but we'd also do well to simply stay close to him, staying within the sound of his voice. This will minimize the volume of the noise and the incoming interferences. And it should not be too difficult because Jesus' goodness has a way of pulling us in and drawing us close. There's something attractive about his voice. In fact, the Greek doesn't really use the word "good", but *kalos*, which means beautiful. Jesus is the beautiful shepherd who inspires us, invites, lures his flock to gather in safety together, as we have today. He then invites us to trust and follow him, sometimes onto windy paths where we cannot see the end, up rocky slopes that are too steep to climb on our own, and into deep valleys...the valleys of the shadow of death. He leads us. He leads us gently into a good and sustaining life, one that nurtures this relationship of abundance.

*Rev. Ken Kovacs notes that when you visit the catacombs outside Rome and the other places where early Christians worshiped, broke bread together, and buried their dead, one of the most pervasive images you'll see on the frescos adorning the walls and ceilings is Jesus as shepherd, carrying a sheep on his shoulders, wrapped around his neck. You won't find crosses. But you'll find images of Jesus as shepherd because, well because, that's what spoke to them. It's this image of God that resonated with them, that has always resonated with God's people, summoned them and touched the depth of their souls. A lowly shepherd, a good shepherd, a beautiful shepherd, who loves, protects and provides, even lays down his life for his sheep.*

So, friends, our Good Shepherd is calling us, by name...yes, amid the noise of our lives. He is calling us out from the sheepfold, where we may have been comfortably hiding,<sup>5</sup> hear his voice and follow him into an "abundant life"...abundant because in it we will come to know his enormous love for us...so enormous that he laid down his life because he sees us worthy of the sacrifice, so enormous that he has also taken it back up again too so that when we go astray from the right and good path, when we put ourselves in grave danger, we will still be recipients of his gentle, forgiving, forever seeking love.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Adam Thomas. "Young Leaders Series III: The Sheepfold". <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002dad/young-leaders-series-iii-the-sheepfold>. (accessed 4-29-23).

<sup>6</sup>David Lose. "Abundant Life". <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear0working-preacher/abundant-life>. (accessed 4-23-21).

The questions for us are these: “Are we listening for the Shepherd’s voice?” and “Will we follow” If the answers are yes, brothers and sisters, I am here to tell you that we will find our heads to be anointed with oil and our cups to be overflowing. Our Shepherd’s goodness and mercy will most certainly follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

*(Pause)* So the take-away for us from this passage on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter? If we would but listen with discerning ears, I believe we can actually HEAR it. We can hear it in the voice that matters, the voice of our risen Savior speaking to our hearts. It is message that we are, each of us, intimately known and all of us members of his flock. It is the message that we can just bask in the security of his fold (*use arms*). Yes, this is the take away. This is the take away. But there is also something else here...there is an invitation in the voice of our risen Lord too. We are beckoned to follow him into the pasture in which we can graze. We are led out into the world to live into our salvation, to live IN and WITH him who has accomplished it for us, the One eternally incarnated, crucified and resurrected. We do this by joining ourselves to his mission and ministry in the world, working to bring others into his flock, and standing with them against whatever injustice is threatening to rob them of the life which is theirs to claim as well. If you are here today looking for a way to serve in Christ's mission and ministry, consider sharing in the Shepherd's divine work through Cove House, Samaritan's Purse, Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to name a few. *"So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep...Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."*

Amen.

They need a shepherd who will lay down the entrance to their fold to protect them at night and then stands to lead them out during the day.