

Discerning The Voice of the Good Shepherd

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I. Introduction

In the scripture reading today, Jesus has to explain what he means more than once to his listeners. So we shouldn't feel bad if we don't grasp the meaning right away ourselves. We have the added challenge of deciphering two-thousand-year-old images and translating the stories into modern language.

John 9, the preceding chapter, is about the man who was born blind and receives his sight. While that story is all about sight, chapter 10 has a lot to do with hearing and recognizing the voice of the shepherd. Thus, it has a lot to do with discernment, because there is not just the Good Shepherd, but there are false shepherds out there too. **What are the other voices out there and how do we discern them from the voice of the Good Shepherd?**

John 10:1-15 - New International Version The Good Shepherd and His Sheep

10 "Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him,

and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.14"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me

¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

II. The Sheep

Sheep get a bad rap these days. Who here has said, "I want to be a sheep," or "I am just like a sheep?" We don't typically want to call ourselves sheep. To be a sheep implies being a follower, right? A sort of blind, unthinking, submissive person, who can't do much for himself or herself. We would much rather think of ourselves as leaders, or at the very least free and critical enough not to be lead blindly. Who here has heard the word "sheeple?" It's a word used to denigrate members of a group of people who appear to be mindless followers. No one wants to be a sheeple. But I doubt people long ago would have thought of sheep this way.

If we were to go back two thousand years to ancient Israel we would have seen flocks of sheep everywhere. The country was rocky and somewhat dry and not suitable for farming, so sheep had to be led to good grazing sites. There were wolves and lions and other deadly creatures out here that can kill a sheep. There were also bandits and thieves who would love to steal with a wayward sheep.

Because of all the dangers of the wilderness, sheep have to stay together and they also have to be able to recognize their shepherd's voice. There are eyewitness accounts of several flocks of sheep converging at a watering hole and intermingling. As an outside observer, you wouldn't be able to tell one sheep from another, but when a shepherd called, the sound of his voice would alert his flock and his own sheep would disengage from the larger group to follow him, each one, without exception. The sheep would not

follow a stranger's voice or any other shepherd but their own. The sheep knew the shepherd's voice as a child knows its mother's voice.

So sheep have intelligence. Their ability to discern the voice of their shepherd and follow him wherever he leads is an essential life saving skill. Not recognizing the voice or following the shepherd, out in the wilderness, is a matter of life and death. So we need to give the sheep some credit for their instinctual ability to follow, not blindly, but correctly.

A sheep, perhaps even more than a human, may be aware that it would not survive long on its own without the protection and guidance of its shepherd. Why is this? Because they are very **vulnerable**. I think vulnerability is what characterizes sheep most in this context and it is a quality we share with them in many respects.

We are vulnerable to diseases and other forms of physical harm. Less obvious, but just as real is that we are also vulnerable to psychological and spiritual dangers. A strong body, high I.Q. or emotional intelligence, not to mention a big bank account do not protect us from the pitfalls of life or from being misled by false promises and lies.

III. The Shepherd

Lets turn now to the shepherd and recognize that the profession had many dangers. The wilderness of Palestine was tough and unforgiving, with cold dark nights and hot days. A shepherd had to know how to survive the seasons and navigate the terrain to find water and good pasture. There were the aforementioned wild animals and bandits, which could kill a shepherd and there were also cliffs, and snakes, and scorpions. So a shepherd was also vulnerable. But the shepherd always was the first one to encounter any of the dangers in the path, because the shepherd led the way for the sheep.

The shepherd also had a deep attachment to his sheep. He knew them by name, having raised them from birth. Each sheep would have been accounted for each day.

There were two kinds of sheep pens in ancient Palestine. In the villages, there were communal pens, with a high wall and a door where the sheep and shepherd would be let

in and out by a gatekeeper and several flocks could be held together and protected. A shepherd would call to his sheep when it was time for them to go out and they would recognize his voice.

Out in the wilderness, there was another kind of sheep pen. These were low-walled stone enclosures that didn't have a gate or doorway, but an opening in the wall. When the sheep were safely in one of these pens for the night, the shepherd would lay in the opening of the wall and would literally be the door - the living gate - of the sheep pen. Jesus' audience would have known this because they all would have seen these sheep pens for their entire lives, just as we all know what a stone wall looks like. Jesus was being literal when he said, **"I am the gate for the sheep."** Any bandits or wolves would have to get through the shepherd to get at the sheep. Therefore, **the shepherd literally laid down his life for his sheep.**

So this background information tells us something about the Good Shepherd. **He leads, he knows, he protects, and he calls.**

He leads the way, being first to meet all the dangers of the wilderness.

He knows his sheep and they know him.

He protects his sheep with his own life.

He calls to his sheep and they recognize his voice.

The recognition of the shepherd's voice is very important. Jesus says of strangers, the sheep **"won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it."**

IV. False Shepherds

When Jesus speaks of being the Good Shepherd, his audience would have been familiar with the prophet Ezekiel's warning against false shepherds.

In Ezekiel chapter 34, The voice of the Lord speaking through the prophet says, **"Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?"** ³ **You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and**

slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. ⁴ **You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals."**

Jesus refers to the false shepherds as **strangers, thieves and hired hands.**

The strangers' voice scattered the flock.

The thieves were only there to plunder.

The hired hand would lead for a time, but run off at the first sign of danger.

If we look and listen carefully, we can see and hear these characters at work in the world today.

We have heard many divisive voices during the pandemic. Some said, "trust the science, trust the government." Other voices said, "don't trust the drug cartels and their government cronies." **Where is the voice of our Good Shepherd** in this issue that has divided so much of the nation?

We have all heard voices that support war. Some of the voices that led us to war in Iraq twenty years ago are still speaking. Our weapons are this very day being used to kill people we will never know, many of them poor and dispossessed. Are the voices calling for our support of war **echoing the voice of the Good Shepherd?**

Then there are the voices of the advertisers who say, "Buy our products to look beautiful. Buy our food to fill yourself and be satisfied. Buy our drugs to be saved from illness." Salvation from age, salvation from hunger, salvation from suffering, boredom and emptiness. Promises of salvation left and right, and all for a price. **Is the voice of the Good Shepherd in any of these promises?**

These are some of the voices we encounter every day in our connected world, but we also hear voices within us, voices that compel us to hate and judge other people or ourselves. When I am tempted to judge someone who does not see things the way I see them, or when I try to correct someone before I listen to them, is that smug and self-righteous voice inside me **the voice of the Good Shepherd?**

When I feel insulted by someone close to me, and hold on to my anger and resentment, meanwhile creating lists of grievances old and imagined and bide my time so I can make a smart comment, **is that voice inside me the voice of the Good Shepherd?**

There are many more examples I could give of voices, both inner and outer that compete for dominance in our minds and in the world of social discourse.

But through it all, the Good Shepherd also calls to us. How do we recognize his voice above the tumult? How do we discern his voice in a world crowded with voices? **How do we know who to follow and discern true leadership from the false shepherds? How do we know what voice within us is true to His calling?**

V. The Good Shepherd

To discern means to perceive or recognize something, to have keen insight and good judgement. How can we discern Jesus' voice in the issues of the today's world?

First of all, we seek to hear Jesus voice in scripture. That is our number one source of strength and guidance. But I think it can be a process to understand Jesus' meaning and there is a continual unfolding as we seek to follow him. We recall that Jesus had to explain his meaning more than once to his audience. So it is not a given that we see or hear things clearly at first. We must seek it out for ourselves and share our search with others.

As we seek out the voice of the Good Shepherd, we may find that we carry it within us, among all the other voices. Seeking his voice within, through prayer and love is another way we may hear the Good Shepherd calling to us.

We can hear his voice in our community of faith, among our brothers and sisters who also seek to follow him. We are not alone and there is great strength in the fellowship of those who seek his voice. (and there are many outside the church tradition who seek his voice as well).

There are other ways we may encounter the voice of the Good Shepherd calling to us, through our conscious affirmation of the beauty and miracle found in nature or in the contemplation of art and music.

We know that when Jesus says, **"I am The Gate for the sheep"** and **"I am The Good Shepherd,"** he is identifying himself as Yaweh-God, for it was out of the burning bush that God said to Moses, "I am that I am." When Jesus says, "I am" he is telling us about himself, and he is telling us about the nature of God.

As we are called to be sheep following Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we are reminded that Jesus is called the lamb of God. He made himself vulnerable as a sheep, following God. He models with his life how we should be following God in perfect love. And we can follow Jesus because he knows the way. He knows us and calls us and lays his life down for us in perfect love, leading us through the cross to abundant life. Amen.

Prayer of Pastoral Care Easter 5, Sun May 7, 2023

Psalm 23 says, "*The LORD is my shepherd... (who) restores my soul, (who) leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*" In God's name let us pray for our needs, and for those of the world, saying, God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

Good Shepherd, you call us by name, and we know your voice. Open the gate for us, that we may come and go freely, that we may have life, and have it abundantly. God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

Shepherding God, in a dangerous world let us hear your voice. we pray for the whole church, that we may be devoted to the teachings of your Word and to universal fellowship, being generous to all who have need.

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the earth, for green pastures and still waters, that we may restore them to the goodness and wholeness that they had at the time you created them. May we act together on behalf of land and oceans for the human family and for all living creatures who know this as home. God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the people of the world, their nations, and leaders, that your wisdom and peace may govern all, so that no one will fear for their safety. We lift up the people of Ukraine and Russia that ways may be found to end the war and its devastation. We pray for a cease fire and for humanitarian relief in Sudan. As we pray for all victims of violence, our prayers are for healing for those in our own nation who have been wounded or lost loved ones in mass shootings.

God of resurrection, **hear our prayer.**

Be with refugees and asylum seekers in our world. We thank you for all who welcome strangers and newcomers in our midst. May we be a community of caring. Strengthen those who work each day to heal the sick, welcome outcasts, and help sisters and brothers in need.

Hear our prayers for those on this church's immediate needs list. ...

Lead us beside still waters; teach us the way of righteousness; and feed us at your table; through Jesus Christ, our good shepherd. Amen.

OFFERING

Our God has prepared a table before us and our cup overflows. Let us give generously from our common wealth, as our way of praising God and giving to those in need.

*DOXOLOGY

*PRAYER

Holy and generous God, you have anointed us and we are yours. Bless these tithes and offerings that they may become green pastures and still waters for any and all who need your comfort and restoration. Amen.