

## **“The Shepherd’s Voice”**

Date: May 15, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 10:1-10

Theme: shepherd, listening,

Occasion: Easter 4, Year A

Numbers. Our lives are filled with numbers. Each year we file our income taxes. Now *that’s* an exercise in numbers, to end all numbers games. Pages upon pages of numbers: earned numbers, spent numbers, invested numbers and saved numbers. When it is finally prepared, we send it off to the IRS with our Social Security number on it.

The IRS takes all those numbers and puts them into a computer, along with the numbers of thousands upon thousands of other people. To them, we become a number.

The government knows us by our tax number. The state knows us by our drivers license number. The bank knows us by our account number. And when we retire, we’ll be remembered by our Social Security number. And on and on it goes. In fact, sometimes I wonder if anybody knows us at all, without a number!

And that’s why this morning’s Gospel lesson is so significant, because it tells us that God knows us. God knows us intimately, in fact - better than we know ourselves. And that’s important to remember. In spite of the fact that the image of sheep and shepherd are foreign to our experience, the words of the Gospel lesson are sweet music to our souls. We long to hear that someone really knows us, and loves us.

The Old Testament writer put it even more clearly when he wrote, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” Jesus says it this morning, My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me, and I give them eternal life.”

Jesus says that his sheep know the sound of his voice. They will follow him and no one else. How do sheep learn the sound of the shepherd’s voice? Simply by

spending a lot of time with the shepherd. They hear his voice often. They cannot be fooled by the sound of other voices. They will follow *only* the sound of their master.

We live in a world, today, that literally has thousands of voices screaming at us, all vying for attention. “Easy sex with no responsibility,” shout our movies and tv shows. “Live the life-style of the rich and famous, or else you’re a nobody,” declares Hollywood. “Live for today and forget tomorrow,” says a cacophony of voices. “Take care of number one, nobody else will,” goes the popular advice.

Are these the voices of Jesus speaking? Hardly. And yet they are the voices that are clamoring for our attention every day. How can we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the midst of all this noise? Unless we return to a life of prayer and reading the Bible, we soon forget what the Good Shepherd’s voice sounds like.

I am amazed at the number of times I have found myself in situations where I didn’t know how to respond to a person - whether it was a crisis, or a counseling situation, or just a personal conversation. But because I had spent time in prayer at the beginning of that day, words came out of my mouth that surprised even me.

The person said, “that was so helpful.” Or, “that was beautiful.” It seemed to both of us that God had spoken. I share that example, not to boast about myself, because I’m not that smart to know the answers to everyone’s problems. But I share that example to share that often-times, by spending some quality time with God in prayer, His voice comes to us, at just the time we need to hear it.

This doesn’t happen just to me. It happens to many Christians that I’ve talked to. It is as though God is speaking through them. Or people have told me that ‘on a hunch’ they went next door to talk to a neighbor, or they called a friend that they

hadn't spoken to in a long time.

And that person marveled at the visit or the phone call. "How did you know that I needed someone to talk to? You came at the absolute perfect time." That kind of thing happens, often, to the person who spends time in prayer with the Good Shepherd, who directs their feet, and their hands and their mouths. The sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd, and are quick to follow.

In her book *The Preaching Life* Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a conversation she had with a friend, who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. According to him, sheep are not dumb at all. "It is the cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cattle.

"Cows are herded from the rear, by shouting cowboys with cracking whips. But that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises, and all they do is run behind you, because they prefer to be led.

"You push cows, her friend said, but you lead sheep. And they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first, namely their shepherd, who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right."

Sheep know their shepherd, and their shepherd knows them. Do you know the sound of Jesus' voice? Can you recognize his voice above all of the other voices calling to you? Are you spending time in His Word? Are you spending time with Jesus in prayer? Are you learning to listen for His voice?

Jesus' followers recognize his voice, because his voice is so familiar. They discern its cadence; they remember its reassuring rhythms. Over and over again, in times of distress and pain, when they were not sure they could take one more step along the pathway of suffering or trial, Jesus spoke words of comfort to them: "Peace, I leave with you. My peace I give to you I do not give to you as the world

gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Many times, when their faith faltered, and their vision grown dim, Jesus has reassured has them: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” (John 14:1) when they were uncertain of life’s purpose, confused about what makes life good and true, he has called them anew, “this is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)

Even when they stood at the rim of death’s canyon, staring with grief into its violet depths, ever and over he has spoken to them of hope: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet will they live.” John 11:25

At every bend in the road, in every predicament along the way, they have felt Jesus’ presence and have heard his familiar words. All the days of their lives, He has been the Good Shepherd, and they know his voice.

In the flurry of voices that fill the world, the followers of Jesus listen for the sound of the voice they know best, the voice that speaks compassionately, mercifully, lovingly, hopefully. When they hear this voice - but only this voice - they follow. They do not respond to the voices of stranger, to the voices of bitterness, judgment, hatred and strife.

But it is more than familiarity that causes the followers of Jesus to recognize his voice. Jesus calls his sheep by name and leads them out. The voice of Jesus speaks personally and commandingly. The voice of Jesus is not spoken over a public address system, making a vague general announcement for all the world to hear. The voice of Jesus speaks to each one, lovingly calling out each name, summoning each and every person to follow.

The voice of the shepherd is there whispering His love for us. Calling us, wooing us into an ongoing relationship. His voice is not as annoying as the Verizon Guy, so you won't hear Jesus say, "Can you hear me now?" But if your heart and soul are tuned to Christ, you will hear the voice of the shepherd. Are you listening?

Let us pray.