4/30/23 Sermon: Easter 4A, Good Shepherd Sunday, John 10:1-10

Pastor Megan Hoewisch (pronounced Hay-wish), First Lutheran Church, Havre, MT

Children’s Sermon, with help from the sheep and shepherd figurines from our nativity set:

What’s this? It’s a sheep! Who is this? It’s a shepherd! Do you know what a shepherd does? A shepherd takes care of the sheep. Sometimes sheep like to go wandering off, and they can get lost and then be in danger. A shepherd finds the lost sheep and keeps the sheep out of danger. And sometimes the sheep need help finding the best grass to eat and the cleanest water to drink. A shepherd moves them to the best places to eat and drink. And sometimes there are thieves who want to steal the sheep, or wolves that want to eat the sheep! A shepherd stops the thieves and the wolves from getting to the sheep.

Shepherds are pretty cool, aren’t they? And guess what: Jesus is like a shepherd. Jesus takes care of us, just like a shepherd takes care of his sheep. Jesus knows us each by name, and Jesus knows just what we need. That’s why we call Jesus the Good Shepherd.

Let’s pray: Jesus, you are really good. You lead us, you feed us, and you protect us. Thank you for all that you do for us. Keep us safe and healthy this week. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Maker and Christ our Risen Savior. Amen.

After college, I spent three years teaching English to Korean kindergarteners in Seoul, South Korea. This was an immersive program, so the kids were only supposed to hear English during the day, which made it ok that I couldn’t speak Korean. But at the start of the school year, the kids couldn’t speak or understand any English, either. This only really became a problem when it was lunchtime, and seven different classes all came together at the bathrooms to wash hands before tromping to the cafeteria.

It was chaos. Absolute chaos in the beginning of every year as dozens and dozens and dozens of kids milled around the bathroom area, with no understandable instructions to guide them.

After the first week of school, they still had no English, really, but they knew the sound of their teacher’s voice. I could call out, “Megan Teacher’s Class, line up here!” and 15 little faces would turn to me in recognition and flock to where I was. I could have called out nonsense words and those same 15 faces would still have locked on me over the hubbub. Because they knew the sound of my voice.

This moment of the day, when my little flock responded to the sound of my voice, rather than the voice of the strange teacher two classrooms down, always reminded me of this gospel of the Good Shepherd. “The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger...because they do not know the voice of strangers” (John 10:5). But they knew and trusted my voice, and they followed where I led.

If only it was always that easy to recognize and follow the voice of the true Good Shepherd. In Jesus’s pastoral figure of speech, his sheep know his voice even when strangers and thieves and bandits try to lure the flock away. But life is not a figure of speech; it can be messy and complicated, and the thieves and bandits sometimes sound an awful lot like wise and practical guides.

Whose voice do we follow? What voices do we put in the driver’s seat? This can be an uncomfortable line of questioning if we let ourselves get real honest with it. Do we follow the voice of life-long insecurities? Do we follow the voice that tells us to be a people-pleaser, no matter what? The voice of our pride or bitterness? The voice of our relative or teacher or mentor whose validation we’ve always craved? The voice of that one guru or leader or celebrity?

Sometimes it’s easy and even entertaining to watch a movie or read a book and figure out which voices the characters are following. “Ooooh, that guy’s following the voice of his ambition...he’s about to make a whole lot of people mad at him!” “Oh no, she’s trying to please her mother at her children’s expense...this is not going to go well!” Of course it’s easier to trace the influence of different voices when it’s someone else’s life. It can be a lot harder to trace those voices in our own lives.

How do we pick out the voice of the trustworthy and true shepherd amidst the cacophony of our minds and the clamor of our modern world?

Sometimes, the shepherd’s voice is obvious. Like when the angel appeared to Mary with a message straight from God, and she replied, “‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’” (Luke 1:38). Or when—as the story goes—Martin Luther was riding through a storm and he knew with clarity and conviction that if he survived, he would devote his life to the Lord. He survived, and from then on, that’s what he did, even though the voice of his earthly father was against it. Perhaps you have a moment in your life when the right and good and Godly voice was so clear and compelling that you followed it. Thank God for moments like these.

But some other times, the shepherd’s voice is harder to catch. Perhaps there are lots of conflicting voices that you hear, and each voice makes some sense. None feels *the most* right...they all feel *kind of* right. Or, perhaps there’s just ringing silence. No voices at all. No idea about what to do.

In those cases, Jesus gives us a clue in this very passage about what to listen for. He says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Abundant life. The voice of the shepherd leads to abundant life.

Abundant life depends on our context. For the man born blind, who Jesus is talking to in this scene, abundant life is sight. For the child in the foster system, abundant life might be a stable foster family and a cozy room of his own while his family of origin prepares for his return. For the bullied high schooler, it might be that week at camp or extracurricular activity where they can be fully themselves and accepted. For the working parent, it might be support and the companionship of friends. For the retiree, it might be getting involved with a new cause that gives them meaning and purpose and new connections. Abundant life comes in many forms.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Abundant life is not the same as “the easy life” or “the prosperous life,” of course. Following the voice of abundant life won’t mean the smoothest path or the most lucrative path. But it will be the path that carries you to grace upon grace, and blessing upon blessing. As the theologian Debie Thomas writes, this abundant life is “Life that flourishes in precarious places. Life that never denies the real threat of thieves, bandits, and strangers — and yet holds out the possibility of pasture, nourishment, protection, and rest. Life that perseveres and maybe even thrives in the valley of the shadow of death.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

When we’re listening to the voices that pull us and prod us and compel us, which voices lead to this kind of abundant life? Abundant life that blesses not just one sheep, but the whole flock?

Now, it’s true that we don’t always know what the outcome of our choices will be when we choose to listen to *this* voice rather than *that* voice. When the early church had a big decision to make, they prayed, they wrote out the first century equivalent of a pros and cons list, and they met together and talked it out. It’s all there in the book of Acts. In some instances, listening for God’s voice and following God’s abundant life does not have to be—often *shouldn’t* be—a solitary endeavor. I think Jesus chose a communal animal on purpose in this figure of speech—and that alone has something to teach us about the connection between abundant life and community.

Learning to recognize and follow the voice of the shepherd doesn’t happen overnight. Like the practice of hospitality, the practice of listening to God’s voice takes time and patience, effort and commitment. But it’s a commitment that’s worth every ounce of effort.

The great 20th century theologian Dr. Howard Thurman called this voice ‘the sound of the genuine,’ and he preached: “There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. . . . There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. Nobody like you has ever been born and no one like you will ever be born again—you are the only one. And if you miss the sound of the genuine in you, you will be [debilitated] all the rest of your life. Because you will never be able to get a scent on who you are.... can you find a way to hear the sound of the genuine in yourself? There are so many noises going on inside of you, so many echoes of all sorts, so many internalizing of the rumble and the traffic, the confusions, the disorders by which your environment is peopled that I wonder if you can get still enough—not quiet enough—still enough to hear rumbling up from your unique and essential idiom the sound of the genuine in you.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Thurman called this discernment process, this listening for the sound of the genuine, a lifelong assignment. Amidst the noise, amidst all that distracts and threatens us in this life, if we are still our Good Shepherd’s voice calls to us. Leading us beside still waters, through shadowy valleys, and to the table of abundant life. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow [us] all the days of [our lives], and [we] will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Amen.

1. David Lose, Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/abundant-life-now. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Debie Thomas, “I Am the Gate,” *Journey with Jesus*, https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2626-i-am-the-gate. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Howard Thurman, “The Sound Of The Genuine” (Baccalaureate Ceremony) (Spelman College), 1980 May 4, https://thurman.pitts.emory.edu/items/show/838 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)