

“The Voice” based on John 10:1-10
This sermon was preached 5/11/14
Pr. Sarah Semmler Smith
Trinity Lutheran Church

Grace and peace to you from God our heavenly parent and Christ our shepherd.

Today is Mother’s day. It’s also Good Shepherd Sunday. If one wasn’t enough reason then a second gives us cause to celebrate this weekend. So, I thought we’d take a break and play a game here in worship. It’s a version of “Guess Who.” I’m going to play an audio clip, and you get to guess whose voice it is. You ready?

Do you recognize this voice? [Audio plays, “Look at the stars, the great kings of the past look down on us..”] Is this the voice of: a) President Barack Obama, b) Mufasa the Lion, c) James Earl Jones, or d) both b and c. If you answered “D” you would be correct.

Listen to this voice: [Audio plays, “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get.”] Was this: a) The Cadbury bunny b) Tom Hanks as Forest Gump, or C) Pr. Jim imparting his wisdom to us from his Sabbatical. If you said “B” you would be correct. Although I guess it *is* possible Pr. Jim has somehow caught an accent while down South this week.

Finally, this clip is brief and quiet, but current, so be ready. Do you know who said this [Audio plays, “I don’t know why but I’ve always loved the idea of summer...”] Was this: a) Bishop Rick Hoyme, b) anyone who lived through this Wisconsin winter or c) Olaf the Snowman, from the Disney movie, “Frozen.” If you picked “C,” you got it!

No matter how you just did in that silly game, we *all* know who said this: *the sheep hear [the shepherd’s] voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...He goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.*

The books say that an infant is born knowing their mother’s voice. I wasn’t so sure that was true until 2 years ago, May 2nd around 10 p.m., when a red and crying seven pound bundle was brought to my side and I said something like, “hi there little girl”, and our brand new daughter stopped crying, turned her head towards my voice, and tried to open her eyes.

The sound of a voice can be a powerful thing: it can comfort, guide, or hurt us, even when the person who belongs to that voice isn’t directly present. If you stop and think, you might know such a voice: one that you could pick out of a cacophony of others; one that comes into your head at times, unbidden. “Are you sure that’s a wise choice?” it might say. Or, “Money doesn’t grow on trees, young man.” Or, fill in your blank with whatever pearl of wisdom or pill of derision seems to echo in your mind now and then.

It struck me, as I reflected on our gospel text for this morning, that the voices we hear in our heads aren’t random. They are either sound bytes we’ve heard again and again in culture that get stuck in our minds, or they are voices of the people that we knew or we

know best: their likes and dislikes, their opinions and preferences, have been spoken over and over in our presence and have become engrained. It's the voices of these people that we tend to hear and can appear among our thoughts at any given decision point in our life. Maybe for you it is your mother, or father, or a teacher, good friend, a spouse. What the gospel challenges us to consider today, among all those voices and more-- is God's voice.

Jesus said, "the sheep follow (the shepherd) because they know his voice."

I'm not sure what my image of sheep herding has been to this point in my life, or if I had any working idea of it at all, frankly. If I did, I probably pictured man with some kind of shepherd's crook, coming behind the sheep and yelling a bit, maybe with the help of a dog. As I have learned, in the context Jesus would have been familiar with, sheep actually would *follow* a competent and familiar shepherd, like children in line behind teacher, or ducklings after mother duck. I found a video of shepherds in Israel today, calling to, and being followed by their sheep, much as it may have happened in the 1st Century. Watch this [<http://www.sermonspice.com/product/44265/follow-jesus>]

I've watched this clip several times now, and each time I'm always struck as a mother of a toddler. What well behaved sheep! Did you notice, or hear, the shepherds call? How the sheep fell into step behind him, seeming to answer him with their bleating. In the shepherding practices of Jesus day, it wasn't uncommon for several flocks like this to be kept in a common sheepfold or stone pen. The shepherds perhaps didn't worry so much about sorting whose sheep were whose, however, because for the fact that the individual sheep recognized the voice of their own shepherd and followed *that* shepherds lead.¹

The question is: Do we know the voice of our Shepherd, today? There are a lot of voices that try to compete. We are no less in need to hear from Christ than people have ever been, but it can be difficult to discern whether any given voice we hear is, in fact, God.

As we observe the blooming spring, it is evident that God *can* speak through nature. But then that message is often ambiguous: a rain cloud can mean can mean life to those in drought and death to those experiencing flood. God can speak through our inner leanings and intuition. But how to discern whether it is God talking or our biochemical workings, is an art learned over a lifetime and not precise. God can and does speak through other people, and God bless us when we feel the Spirit's embrace through others! But some arms are use to harm, not hug; some people use words to kill and not heal.

I like what the Rev. Dr. Craig Satterlee once said, "God is everywhere. God tells us, in effect, 'If you need to find me in a hurry, it's bread, wine, Word. That's where I'll be.'" Bread/wine and word. We have been left with *more* than a clue as to where God consistently, truthfully, seeks to speak to us today. Jesus says later in John's gospel, "If you know me, you will know the Father also." If we've heard Jesus, we have heard God. Our job is to learn to know his voice! To spend time with him. Scripture and sacrament, worship and Word. We return to them not for the sake of tradition but because over time, our goal is to get to know Jesus:

¹ Diane Bergant. *The Word for Every Season* (Congregation of St. Agnes, 2010).

what he liked and didn't like, what he would say and wouldn't say, so well and so intimately, that it is *his* voice that not only shows up but can drown out the negative voices that banter for our attention.

Martin Luther, arguing with the papacy in the 1500's, declared that *they* did not have the right to define who and what the church. He said, "God be praised, a seven year old child knows what church is: holy believers and 'the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.'"²

"Holy believers" gathered here today, seek to know the voice of Jesus, so that you don't miss him speak! When you are hurting, him saying "peace be with you." When you are rejoicing, his 'hosanna' joining ours. When you are unsure, him saying 'follow me.'

Jesus told this story about sheep in the context of a man born blind, who heard Jesus talking along the road and called out to him. With some mud and spit, that man was healed, brought back into community from a life of isolation and given a second chance. He heard the voice of the shepherd, was able to answer, and was saved in a very concrete way.

We too need to learn Christ's voice for the sake of our own such healing. In case we are hard of hearing, our shepherd calls us, calls you, *by name*. Not to condemn you or for the sake of something long off in the clouds, but in order to lead you by his voice to pasture, into a life that really is life, abundant, now. Abundant not in possessions or comfort but abundant in love most definitely.

That's who the church is: the sheep who are known by and follow their shepherd. Thanks be to God for Jesus, the good shepherd, who knows us first, calls us by name, and invites us to follow his lead.

Let us pray:

Shepherding God, help us to recommit ourselves to learning to sound of your voice above all others, and then, as we do hear you, give us the courage to follow where you lead, even to the cross. Amen.

² Smalcald Articles, Part III, Section 12.