

“The Shepherd’s Voice”

“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (John 10:3-4).

My career as a preschool teacher lasted about 90 minutes. When I joined Emmanuel’s staff in 1996 one of my responsibilities was to serve as the director of our small preschool program. Basically, my job was to keep track of the financial records and oversee our teaching staff of one. I had very little to do with the actual day-to-day activities in the classroom...that is until one particular afternoon when our teacher had a family emergency. I took the phone call and walked down to the preschool room with the urgent message, not realizing the implications of this development. You see, without any time to contact a substitute teacher and with only an hour and a half left in the school day I was the only option to cover the class. As she hurried out of the building, I suddenly found myself staring at a dozen three year-olds who were completely unsympathetic to my plight.

It took about five minutes for things in that room to start unraveling. One child had to go to the bathroom. Another insisted that it was time for a snack. Two others began fighting over a toy. Another group of kids started painting each other with finger paint. Now, I had watched our teacher manage the group before. With a quiet and controlled voice she would speak to the children and like well-drilled soldiers they would begin cleaning up their area and then move to the reading rug or the snack table or whatever part of the room was waiting for their next activity. So, I tried to replicate her routine. I turned the lights on and off, I sang the Barney “clean-up” song, but no matter what I said or how persuasive I tried to be in my tone, the kids continued to do whatever they wanted to do and my sense of panic grew with each passing moment.

It was one of the longest afternoons of my life and it’s also a perfect illustration of the truth revealed in today’s Gospel reading. Jesus said, “he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep...The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Our readings and hymns are filled with images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and as long as the church has existed, the picture of a Shepherd as been used to tell us about God and the way He deals with us. In the Good Shepherd we see the One who calls and feeds and cares for His helpless and straying sheep even though it costs Him His own life. David wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1) and Jesus said, “When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” We’ve heard these poetic words many times and we are comforted by their familiar sound, but today I want to you understand what these words mean in their most practical sense because they carry amazing promises. They tell us that we belong to the Shepherd, that He will call us by name and lead us and that we will “dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” So, what do these amazing words mean? How does God shepherd His people? What does the Shepherd's voice sound like in real life?

Part of the answer is found in today’s reading from Acts. Here we find a very practical, very clear picture of how God calls and shepherds us and we see it in Luke’s description of the early Christians. He writes that following the miracle of Pentecost, the Church, “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42).

On that first Christian Pentecost, the city of Jerusalem was filled with Jews from all over the world who had come to celebrate the harvest feast and it was here, in this crowded and festive atmosphere, that the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and Peter began to preach, and by the end of that day, about three thousand people were added to the Church. And do you know what Peter did in this powerful sermon? He told them about the Shepherd! He preached about Jesus Christ crucified and risen and, even today, this is the essential message of the Church. Our faith is founded on these historical, objective facts about God and that same message of Christ’s death and resurrection was at the center of the Apostles’ teaching mentioned in Acts 2:42.

It seems too simple! It seems too small a thing. How could this uncomplicated message about what Jesus did 2,000 years ago actually make a difference in our lives? Our pride tells us that there must something else we need to do; something we need to search out. There must be some deeper truth; some greater insight; some mystical key that will lead to a glorious new level of spiritual enlightenment. And this desire is nothing more than our sinful need to add to what God has done; to insert ourselves into the mix; to leave the Shepherd’s care and walk our own way.

My friends, we need to take God at His Word and that Word first tells us that we are sheep...*and this isn’t a compliment!* Our desire is always to stray; to go our own way, thinking that we are better off on our own. And we need to understand that all of the things we love about ourselves – the nice things we do for others and all of the ways in which we point to our own righteousness – these are all idols designed to drown out the Shepherd’s voice.

We need to hear God's Words that clearly tell us that our works cannot justify us, that our good intentions and virtuous acts do nothing to earn us favor with God, that we are sheep and that have strayed; that we are in real danger of hell, and that on our own we are without hope. We need this Word from God because when these words from the Shepherd have broken through and opened our ears, the voice of our Shepherd is still there and He is speaking words of forgiveness, and words of grace and a promise of life that He sealed with His own blood. *This* is the voice of the Shepherd and *this* is the Word that saves us – even though it may look and sound worthless to the world.

Think about this: On that first Pentecost, Peter preached Christ crucified and Christ risen to the very people who killed Him! And when the people heard his message they were “cut to the heart” and they asked the apostles what they should do. And immediately, Peter pointed to God where God promises to be present. “Repent and be baptized” Peter said, “for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” He didn't send them on some quest designed to uncover hidden truths about God. He didn't demand them to display their worthiness or prove their penance. No, Peter simply said, “Repent and be baptized.” And in those words, they heard the voice of the Shepherd.

In Psalm 23, David wrote about the Good Shepherd saying, “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:2-3). And in the waters of Holy Baptism God give exactly what He promises: He forgives...He fills...He leads...He liberates...He restores the soul. And in the “breaking of bread” experienced in Holy Communion God reveals Himself as One who comes to us and is present with us in the body and blood of His Son.

And in Acts 2:42, Luke tells us that this is what the Church did: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Don't forget this verse! These words are not merely an historic description of an ancient and dead church. No! Instead, these words of Luke describe the life of the Church today. The Apostle's teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer: This is where God is found! This is where God tells us about Himself. *This is where the Shepherd speaks.* And this is the completely unique function and work of the Church. Here, in the Apostles' teaching and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and in prayer our Good Shepherd leads us “in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” Here, “Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, for God is with us.” Here, “He prepares a table before us and fills our cup to overflowing.” And because of what God does here, “we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

We gather here in worship to do what no one else in the world can do...to proclaim that Jesus has come, that He has shed His blood for the world's sins, that He has risen from the dead for the world's salvation, and that He is constantly among us offering Himself for our eternal life. Here, through the Apostles' teaching, in the fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in our prayer we learn about God...and the work of the Good Shepherd doesn't stop here! Not only does God call, feed, defend and care for us. The Good Shepherd also provides and cares for the world, and He does it through the Christ embodied in you; through your witness to the Risen Christ, through your forgiveness of others, through your faith lived out in real life and expressed in the everyday opportunities God gives you to love another.

Just as God reveals Himself through the simple means of Word and Sacrament, He also reveals Himself to the world through the simple service you and I do for our neighbors. God feeds us, so we can feed others. God comforts us, so we can comfort others. God loves us, so we can love others. God provides for our needs, so that we can provide for the needs we see in the people around us. The center of our text describes this very thing as Luke writes, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

These early believers weren't socialists driven by some utopian ideal. They were men and women who had been joined to Christ – and not in some supernatural, mysterious way – but people who had experienced the body of Christ in every way, and now, through their own physical bodies – in concrete, specific, and practical ways – they shared what Christ had given them with those who needed to hear their Shepherd's voice.

The Gospel had given them the freedom to do this; to love others as Christ had loved them by giving up His life for them as their Good Shepherd; to serve their neighbor as Christ had served them. This was then and is now the life of the Church, the Church outside the church building, the Church that serves others with Christ's gifts embodied in us, and in our active, caring and real expression of love the world will hear the voice of the Shepherd...and they will follow. Live out your faith in the confidence of this Good News. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold