

4 Easter  
Christ and Grace  
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John 10:11-18  
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Psalm 23

In case you have not figured it out, today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Sheep are everywhere, running in every direction – running through the readings, the music, even implied in the collect of the day. And isn't that how life is – so many things going on all the time, so many choices to make. We are very busy sheep and we get so caught up in following all the other sheep around us that we may even forget sometimes that there is a shepherd.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd and in our gospel reading there is just one line that speaks about hearing the voice of the shepherd, but it's an important line. In talking about sheep, both those inside the flock and those yet to enter the flock, Jesus is clear that good sheep will listen to his voice. But in all the bleating chaos of life, hearing God's voice, distinguishing the voice of the Good Shepherd from all the other noise that surrounds us, can sometimes be difficult.

However I would like to challenge that we are not so inept at this as we would like to claim. We are actually quite adept at hearing what we want to hear. Many of us immediately recognize the sound of new mail in the inbox of our laptop, or the special ringtones and text alerts on our cell phones. We know that much awaited sound that our coffee pot makes just as it's finished brewing, letting us know that our morning elixir is ready!

I once had a chocolate Labrador retriever who knew the sound of my car keys. I could not ever pick them up quietly enough to sneak out without alerting her to my departure. She was always at the door ahead of me!

And what about human voices? Those of us who are parents know the sound of our children stirring in the night, or calling out for us when they have gotten separated from us in a crowd. Growing up we knew our parents' voices and we knew better than to ignore them. And when we heard them call our *full* names, first, middle and last, we knew we had better pay attention! We have spent enough time listening to the voices that provide for us and depend on us, that we can recognize them anywhere. The question is, are we going to choose to listen?

We hear what we want to hear, we hear what comforts us, feeds us, brings us happiness. But hearing what we want to hear is not the same as hearing what we need to hear. And when we wander away from the shepherd, out of hearing range, we risk becoming prey to those things that call us away from our shepherd, away from the good, away from God. We sometimes choose to follow our own agendas, hearing only those voices that sound like our own. We begin to graze only on what we want rather than on what we need. Whether we are talking about an unhealthy lifestyle, selfishness in our relationships with family and friends, or an unwillingness to embrace change, we cannot always see what is best for us, and then our relationship with God and others will suffer.

Hearing the voice of the shepherd is about relationship. Only in relationship can we begin to trust that we are truly known. Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." Only when we can trust completely in a relationship

can we find comfort and hope in the rough and rocky places of life. If we refuse to truly listen to God and to the people in our lives, all of our relationships will suffer.

God desires green pastures and still waters for us. God's goodness and mercy follow us, never giving up on us, always seeking to be in relationship with us. In fact, in Psalm 23, the word for follow is the Hebrew word, *radaph*, which actually means "to pursue" in the same way that a hunter pursues its prey. It is a relentless pursuit, but it is a pursuit of love.

Just as the sheep need to hear the voice of the shepherd, we need to hear God's voice to give us direction; to provide comfort and hope in our lives when pastures are not green, and waters are not still; when our souls need reviving, when our paths are in need of redirection, and when we find ourselves walking in the valleys. It is God's voice that will shepherd us through these times.

Have you heard God's voice lately? We might hear it in worship, in scripture and hymns, or through wise words spoken by others – if we are listening. God's voice speaks to us in nature and art and as we serve others. Another way to know God is through silence and prayer. This has become more and more important in our busy, noisy world. The Lord, our Shepherd, wants to lead us beside the still waters, the quiet and restful waters of prayer.

One of my favorite places to go for silence is the monastery in Cambridge, MA, where the Episcopal monks of the Society of St. John the Evangelist offer retreat hospitality. All over the monastery there are large signs that say "silence" because all of us there need to be constantly reminded to be silent! Because it's hard to be silent! What I notice when I am there in the silence is that I am able to see and hear things I would otherwise miss in the noisy parts of life. I find myself listening better, hearing not only what is said, but what is not said. I find myself responding to things not out of fear and judgment but with more compassion. The silence also creates space for creativity and renewal and vision.

Now you all may be saying, "that's great, but we can't all just head off to the monastery and be silent." True! But we can choose to be silent for periods of time during our day, or set aside occasional days to be silent.

Another way is to silence some of those obvious distractions in our lives – the television, the computer games, our cell phones – whatever it is that we use to *avoid* the silence that will bring us into God's presence. Intentionally entering the silence to hear God's voice, our relationship with God might change, we might *be* changed.

What would it be like to know and be known so intimately that there was no more fear or vulnerability, but only complete and total trust and love? What would happen if we followed God in the way that God's mercy and goodness pursue us? The voice of the Shepherd calls to each one of us. How will we answer? I encourage you to take some time each day to listen for God's voice speaking to you.

"Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads." Amen