

Rev. Janet R. Doyle

Elmer Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 23, 2025

Scripture: John 10: 1-18

Sermon: The Good Shepherd: Listen

Many of us today may have very little contact with sheep and shepherds but in many countries today shepherding is still important. Many places in Great Britain still have sheep, in the middle east and in Central Asia where we used to live. There may even be a farm around this part of New Jersey that has sheep.

In many parts of the world, even today, shepherding is a common occupation. Shepherds have a special kind of relationship with their sheep. There might be several flocks belonging to others in the same sheepfold but when the shepherd calls, his sheep recognizes his voice, responds and follows him. To other voices, even attempting to mimic the shepherd, the sheep paid no attention.

The shepherd commonly leads his sheep to pasture, spending the day with them there, sometimes the night also. He defends them from robbers and wild beasts. He keeps the restless animals from trespassing on farmland. He searches eagerly for sheep that have strayed and brings them back. He cares with tenderness for the young and the weak in the flock. To some sheep he gives a special name to which they answer and then receives little expressions of kindness. Where shepherds have that kind of heart, the bond between them and the sheep is a beautiful thing.

Maybe that's why that bond is celebrated in the best-known and most loved of all the psalms, Psalm 23. Many of you may know it by heart. Say it along with me, right where you are. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside the still water. He restores my soul: he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies: you anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

Psalm 23 expresses the conviction that God is like a caring shepherd toward his sheep.

John, chapter 10, verse 11: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, who's own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me, and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Now think of what a remarkable claim it was for Jesus to say, "I am the good shepherd." He was speaking, remember, to people well acquainted with the 23rd Psalm. They knew that it was about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the almighty Creator, the Holy Lord, the God of Covenant. The Most High, was the true Shepherd of His people. And now Jesus says, "I am that One." It was as though He had said, "The Eternal God, who has always been the Shepherd of His people, has come among you in human form. And I, speaking to you, am He." He is the Good Shepherd. He is the Shepherd of Israel who leads His people like a flock.

In this passage, Jesus opens up for us what it means to have a shepherd's heart. The true shepherd is contrasted with pretenders who are only thieves and robbers, who come among the flock to steal, kill and destroy. They have no heart for the sheep but only for themselves. They seize, they exploit, manipulate, harm. But the Good Shepherd wants the best for his sheep. "I came," Jesus says, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). He came that people could enter into the true life for which they were made and taste it to the full. The shepherd with a heart wants the best for his flock. A good shepherd listens to the cries of the sheep and knows the hearts of the sheep.

The shepherd lives in close proximity to the flock under his charge. The sheep become accustomed to the sound of the shepherd's voice. They follow him gladly and he cares for them with individual attention.

"My sheep hear my voice," Jesus says, in today's gospel reading (John 10). "I know them, and they follow me." And I want that to be true. I want it to be true that you and I hear his voice. And that we always follow him. But I'm not always sure that it is.

After all, we live in a very noisy world these days. A world filled with all kinds of different voices, all competing for our attention. And it seems difficult, in the midst of all this noise, to hear the voice of our Shepherd, doesn't it?

You and I have heard a number of different voices this week, to be sure, all competing for our attention. And some of these voices are incredibly good at convincing us to pay attention to them. They create ads, geared just toward us. They convince us that we need whatever they are selling, to be safe, or to be popular, or to be successful, or simply to feel better. Modern technology and social media means that companies know us better than they ever have, and they use that information to convince us that we need whatever they have.

Often false shepherds make promises they cannot keep. There is only one true shepherd, and we are all his sheep. Today, we are reminded to listen to his voice because at the end of the day, there is only one voice we can trust; one voice that truly matters to our soul. And that is the voice of the Good Shepherd, the voice of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

So why don't we always hear and listen to his voice? And how might we hear it more effectively?

The first reason why we sometimes miss hearing Jesus' voice is that he is not saying what we expect to hear.

It's challenging these days to listen to anyone or anything with an open mind. As soon as anyone speaks to us, on social media or anywhere else, we are listening for their agenda, or for evidence of how they view the world. We are making up our mind about what they are saying, even before they finish saying it. That's the nature of the world we live in. And this is why it is more important than ever to listen to Jesus with an open mind, and an open heart. Not to listen for what we expect him to say, but simply to listen. Let our minds be changed. Let our hearts be changed. Put aside all the voices in our world and listen for the loving voice of our true Shepherd.

Sometimes we may be too ashamed to listen. Our sin and guilt causes us to feel unworthy of Jesus speaking to us, so we fail to hear him. In Genesis (3:8), we see this happen with Adam and Eve, after they committed the first sin: "They had heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the

sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

That can happen to us, too. Our sin can cause us to feel naked and ashamed. And we are tempted to hide ourselves from God, so that we can miss hearing his voice calling us.

That is one of the reasons we begin our worship with confession and forgiveness. To acknowledge that we are not worthy, that we don't have our acts together. And to confess that. But also to receive God's forgiveness. To be reminded of God's grace, mercy, and love. And then, because we have been made worthy by Christ, we can listen to the voice of the shepherd.

But there is a third reason why we sometimes miss hearing Jesus' voice. Remember Jonah? “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh ...” But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.”

Remember the rich young ruler? He wanted to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to sell all that he had and give it to the poor, then come and follow him. That was not what he wanted to hear! He “was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Mark 10:22).

Jonah, the rich young ruler, and others in scripture did not want to listen to God, because they didn't like what they were hearing. That can happen to us, too. We don't really want to go where the shepherd is calling us to go or do what the shepherd is calling us to do. So we give up listening to him.

Often when this happens, we need something to happen in our lives that forces us to listen. Our own version of finding ourselves in the belly of the whale. God speaks through some life event we are experiencing.

Author, C.S. Lewis says that “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” And sometimes that is the only way we will hear him. Like a shepherd in search of lost sheep, Jesus looks for us. And doesn't stop until he finds us. “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” We can and do ignore this voice, but still the voice persists. And we often find ourselves restless and unsettled until we hear and respond to his voice and follow him. We have heard his voice enough to know and believe that our lives are not complete until we hear and respond to the voice of the Shepherd until we allow that voice to lead us through our journey on earth and to finally lead us to our eternal home.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”

Jesus is calling us sheep, rather than followers or disciples. This is important, because the people who first heard these words would have pictured the shepherds that they knew. They would have known that these shepherds would often get together with their sheep at various times during the day at a watering hole. The shepherds would spend time talking while the sheep got something to drink. It was noisy and chaotic, to say the least. But at the end of the day, the shepherds would call for their sheep. And the sheep would follow their own shepherds to a safe place to sleep. In the midst of all that chaos and all those competing voices, the sheep would hear their shepherd's voice, recognize it, and follow him.

I think that is why, in today's gospel reading, Jesus describes himself as a shepherd, and we his followers as his sheep. “My sheep hear my voice,” he says, “I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”

You and I have heard a number of different voices this past week, to be sure, all competing for our attention. But at the end of the day, Jesus seems to be saying to us, it is only the voice of the shepherd that can lead us home, that can lead us to safety. It is the voice of the shepherd that has called us to this place. It is the voice of the shepherd that calls us to follow him. And it is the voice of the shepherd that leads us home.

If a flock of sheep is left in one place for too long the sheep will not only eat all of the grass, they will also eat the roots and totally ruin the entire pasture. Sheep must continually be led to the next pasture, or they will destroy the countryside. A good shepherd always knows the location of the next pasture and when to lead the flock in that direction.

In much the same way, God's plan for our lives involves a journey, a forward moving process of growth and discovery. God doesn't intend to let us stay in one place spiritually for very long. He has new pastures, fresh vision, and more growth just over the next hill.

We all ask, “How can I know which way to go?” The more you know the Shepherd and his voice, the more you will know the way the Shepherd is leading.

God will always lead us in the right direction if we listen to Him. His path will become clearer with every step we take on the path but we have to spend time in His presence.

“Listen,” Jesus says in the Book of Revelation (3:20), “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me.”

Today, we are invited to listen again to the voice of our shepherd. To hear his voice. To open the door. And to follow him. And in so doing, to discover once again that there is nothing else that we will want, when the Lord is our shepherd. For his goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life. And we shall dwell in the house of the Lord. Forever. Amen.