

Message: “Knowing That Voice”

What do you get when you cross a sheep and a porcupine?

A sheep that knits its own sweaters. I was looking for a different joke, one along the lines of “a sheep, a goat and a rabbi went into a bar...,” but decided this one was safer.

“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.”

(John 10:2). Each year, the reading for the fourth Sunday of Easter is from the 10th chapter of John about Jesus the Good Shepherd. This year we get the first part, and it’s about the sheepfold and its gate.

A sheepfold is pen built in the area where the sheep are grazing.

Usually in ancient Palestine, this was a stone enclosure. Pens were often shared between the owners of different flocks of sheep, during the day and during the night while everyone rested.

I hear it’s not much different from working with cattle on a grazing lease.

A few small ranchers each provide resources that are shared, and the cattle go where they want, eat grass and drink water where they’re available, and the cowboys sort the cows out by their brands.

But you don’t brand sheep, though they may have an ear tag.

In small sheepfolds, shepherds know the individual sheep by sight and can name each one. In the West, we’re used to shepherders herding sheep from behind, often using dogs to push them to where they want the sheep to go.

Drew Kadel, a pastor in Lincoln, CA, tells a different story.

One day a scholar was meditating out in the wilderness in Palestine, when she heard a young man singing. When she looked up, she saw a shepherd walking in front of his flock and the sheep were following him to their pasture. It makes me think of David as he sang the psalms.

This is the image Jesus is using. The shepherd knows the sheep and calls them by name. They follow because they trust him, and they know his voice. In John’s narrative, Jesus talks about being the Model Shepherd (or Beautiful, Virtuous, Good Shepherd). He does this right after the episode where he healed the one who was born blind.

The one who had always been blind could envision and believe in who Jesus was, but the religious ones couldn't. They tried to bully them into denouncing Jesus. Then Jesus tells them, and us, what it takes to genuinely lead God's people. A true shepherd doesn't burst in and seize the sheep, forcing them to behave. That's what a robber does. A true shepherd approaches gently, respectfully and knows their own sheep, and they trust and follow them.

In Jesus' day, it's clear there were many charlatans claiming to have the real word of God or claiming to be Christ or his representative. Sort of like today. Religious fraud was common. So, the church was on guard about those who would use religion to manipulate people and serve themselves, seizing power for exploitation rather than the compassion of Christ.

In the moment John records, Jesus was in a conflict with religious, business and political leaders who were acting out of their own fear. This led them to distort the Law by narrowing it and interfering with its life-giving aspects.

What does Jesus do in response? He talks about being a shepherd. Jesus then says, *"I am the gate of the sheep"* (v9). This may refer to what we think of as a moveable wall for an enclosure. Or it might mean the shepherds would take their turns standing or sleeping in the narrow opening of the wall. Animals are unlikely to walk over a human being, and if they did, the shepherd would wake up and take notice.

In any case, Jesus says he is the gate of the sheep. In other words, he keeps the flock secure and is there to stop those who would do violence to the flock. And then, there's this...

"Whoever enters... will come in and go out and find pasture" (v8). Jesus guards his community by compassion. This means he gives life and vitality with the green pasture, which is a sign of life, comfort and nourishment. This life is the life of his resurrection.

We know the Shepherd who gave his life for his sheep has come to give us life. It's not the priest, pastor or any other earthly leader that is the Good Shepherd. It's Jesus. And it's in the love of Jesus we know we are nurtured in the life of the resurrection.

Jesus is our way to God. He re-established our broken relationship with God, making a new covenant. Just as the curtain tore, opening the way to the holy of holies on the day Jesus died, he is the one who opens heaven to us.

Not just after we die, but here and now. Jesus often said, “*The kingdom of God is near*” (Matthew 10:7). In God’s kin-dom we find life in its fullest. That’s what Jesus came to bring us. It isn’t half a life, lived in fear, but a life lived completely and with confidence because of what Jesus has done for us.

Jesus opens the door to a new way of living, a better life, where our soul is tended and safe, in good keeping. We’re all welcome to come in and find rest for our soul. All we need to do is listen to his voice and follow him. This is the good news we share with everyone we meet.

When we put up fences, we’re no better than the leaders of Jesus’ day, who ignored what was plainly obvious.

This is the warning God gave to Ezekiel. Those leaders who don’t care for us the way God intended will no longer be leaders. New leaders, those who do care, will be put in place to lead us, helping all the people in our community live with God’s blessings.

Let me close with a story. George Smith travelled in the Holy Land at the end of the 19th century. He relates an incident that illustrates our passage. Here’s an excerpt from his journal:

“Sometimes we enjoyed our noonday rest beside one of those Judean wells, to which three or four shepherds come down with their flocks. The flocks mixed with each other and we wondered how each shepherd would get his own again. But after the watering and the playing were over, the shepherds one by one went up different sides of the valley, and each called out his peculiar call; and the sheep of each drew out of the crowd to their own shepherd, and the flocks passed away as orderly as they came.”

The sheep knows its shepherd’s voice. I believe one of the neglected, seldom-taught skills of a disciple is to learn to discern Jesus’ voice.

We hear many voices - the pressures of our society's expectations, our family's desires, and our own selfish leanings. We can hear Jesus' voice and distinguish it from the noise of this world, but we must make a practice of learning which is which. Prayer helps. I don't know any way to learn this without making mistakes, so it's good to invite the help of a more spiritually mature Christian brother or sister as you discern.

Once we learn to hear Jesus' voice - the leading of the Spirit - then God can guide us, teach us, and help us live more fully than before.¹

Together, let us go and serve the Lord. Amen

Let us pray ...

Ezekiel 34:7-15 (CEB)

So now shepherds, hear the Lord's word! This is what the Lord God says: As surely as I live, without a shepherd, my flock became prey. My flock became food for all the wild animals. My shepherds didn't seek out my flock. They tended themselves, but they didn't tend my flock.

So, shepherds, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims: I'm against the shepherds! I will hold them accountable for my flock, and I will put an end to their tending the flock. The shepherds will no longer tend them, because I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and they will no longer be their food.

The Lord God proclaims: I myself will search for my flock and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out the flock when some in the flock have been scattered, so will I seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered during the time of clouds and thick darkness. I will gather and lead them out from the countries and peoples, and I will bring them to their own fertile land. I will feed them on Israel's highlands, along the riverbeds, and in all the inhabited places. I will feed them in good pasture, and their sheepfold will be there, on Israel's lofty highlands. On Israel's highlands, they will lie down in a secure fold and feed on green pastures. I myself will feed my flock and make them lie down. This is what the Lord God says.

¹ http://www.jesuswalk.com/john/19_shepherd.htm

John 10:1-10 (CEB)

“I assure you that whoever doesn’t enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger but will run away because they don’t know the stranger’s voice.” Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn’t understand what he was saying.

So Jesus spoke again, “I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life - indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.”