

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2020
The Rev. Elizabeth Bingham
St. John's Episcopal Church

Text: John 10:1-10 and Psalm 23

Gracious God, grant us open hearts and open minds to hear your voice and to follow where you lead.
Amen.

I realized in reading the story from John's gospel over the past few days that the Easter stories we have been hearing over these weeks have had a unique theme that I never realized before – they are all about engaging our various senses. I have no idea if this was an intentional plan set out by the folks who came up with our lectionary cycle, but there you have it.

First it was touch: in the days after Jesus's death and resurrection, he returns to the upper room with his disciples but Thomas, not being present for Jesus's first appearance to them says he can't accept it until he can touch Jesus and touch his wounds.

Then it was sight and taste: the disciples on the road to Emmaus not recognizing – not seeing – Jesus until he broke with them, until they tasted the bread.

This week it is hearing: Our story in from John's gospel this morning, Jesus tells his followers a story about shepherds and their sheep. In this metaphor, he emphasizes the point that sheep know the voice of their shepherd, that they recognize it over the other voices of other shepherds. They know and follow the voice of their shepherd.

This, of course, makes sense. And it certainly would have made sense to our first century sisters and brothers. They knew something about shepherds, perhaps even some of those listening to him were shepherds.

The metaphor of God or Jesus as the shepherd is a common one, used throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It is a comforting image, as we heard reflected in the 23rd Psalm. We have probably all seen, at some point or another, a painting or sculpture or other artistic rendering of Jesus as a shepherd, tending to his flock. There is beauty and tenderness in these images, reflecting the bond between a shepherd and his sheep, between God and God's people. In our reading today, Jesus is emphasizing the depth and intimacy of this relationship – the sheep hear his voice; he calls them by name and leads them out and the sheep follow because they know *his* voice; they know *their* shepherd's voice.

It's easy to see why this particular image is used so often for Jesus – a shepherd guided his sheep to food and drink; he kept them together as a community; he stayed with them always, seeking any that went astray and bringing them back to the fold; he protected them from harsh weather and from other animals that would prey on them; he slept with them in the sheepfold.

A shepherd's singular devotion and responsibility was to his sheep and the sheep understood that. They listened for and followed the voice of their shepherd, even as they sometimes wandered far from him and the fold, they eventually heard his voice.

As I read this story again and again over the past week, and I acknowledged the peacefulness of the image of Jesus as a tender of sheep, I kept going back to the idea of the sheep knowing their shepherd's voice, recognizing it over the voices of the other shepherds, which led me to thinking about how I hear and recognize God's voice in my life, in my sheep-like wanderings in this world.

In these moments...hours, maybe...of cerebral meanderings I discovered something about myself that perhaps I already knew but couldn't fully articulate until this moment in time. You see, in the midst of these 7 weeks of spending most of my time with silence, I have found that my ability to hear God's voice depends on a bit of a cacophony. While many people need the sounds and sights of the world stripped away to hear with their hearts – which is really what listening to God is all about, the deep listening of our hearts – I have found that it is IN those sights and sounds that God is most present to me.

I read or hear Psalm 23 and think, hmm....the idea of being beside still waters and lying down in green pastures does not bring me comfort or make me feel closer to God. And, then I would think, what in the world is wrong with me! Filtering out the noise and the distractions are the way to open up to God's voice, to God's presence. Except they aren't for me. And, I have to admit that this troubled me a bit this past week...until I started thinking back to times in my life when I could so clearly recognize the voice and presence of God or to times when I was most connected to myself, secure and present to God.

I remembered when I was discerning my call to the priesthood and when, after I was ordained, discerning what being a priest meant to ME. In each of these instances, I first sought someplace quiet and peaceful – retreat centers and quiet walks along the lake. And I heard nothing. Then I went to Lake Michigan when it was windy and waters were churning. I needed to hear and see the crashing waves, not the still, glass-like surface but the roiling, raucous water. And there God was, speaking so clearly to me.

A couple years ago I again sought to “get away” from the noise to try to listen to where God was calling me so I went to a retreat center in the middle of nowhere Maryland.

I spent two days walking in meadows and along a stream...and felt only silence. So, I packed up and headed into Baltimore. I spent the next few days walking the streets of this gritty city, hanging out with people who were trying to build an eclectic and open faith community centered around a response to gun violence in the city. And there God was. I heard God's voice in the sounds of those in jail and in the homeless camps and shelters in Grand Rapids.

You see, I realized in thinking about all of these stories and pondering how and where I am hearing God's voice during this time, that I would be the sheep that wouldn't wander off into the far pasture or deep into the woods; I would be the sheep that would wander into the city, into the market square seeking connection, seeking to be in the thick of it, hearing God's voice in the voices and actions of God's people. It was kind of freeing to figure this out.

The point I'm trying to make, friends, is that we all hear God's voice in our own way. For some, for many, perhaps, it is in the stillness; in the quiet and the peace, away from the sights and sounds of the world. For others, like me, it is a very incarnational experience – hearing and seeing God revealed in the grittiness of the world, in the sights and sounds and smells of people doing their best to navigate a complicated world. It is through their stories that hear God speaking to me, recognizing me as a sheep of the fold who needs a different experience and meeting me in that place.

GHHI STORY

I hope you are seeking God's voice and God's presence during this time, in whatever way makes sense for you. God is here, in our midst, in our silence and in our sound, in our distance and in our connection. Jesus, the shepherd of the sheep, is always speaking to us, always leading and guiding us, in a voice that each of us can hear in our own way if we tune our hearts to it.

I have found in these weeks that freeing myself of expectations of things being a certain way – like hearing him in the still, small voice – has created a different spirit-filled space for me. I guess I

needed the rather extreme contrast of silence and noise that this time of isolation has brought to discern better how to listen for Jesus speaking to me. I hope you are finding time to listen for the shepherd's voice leading you beside still waters or to the edge of roiling seas; to the solitude of mountains and pastures or to the cacophony of city streets. There is no one place where God resides; it is wherever each of us go to hear God's voice calling to us to follow.

I pray that each of us will listen for God's voice and recognize that God speaks to each of us in the way we need to hear. The easiest way to hear God, I've found, is when I listen for Love. That is the language of God. Listen and look for love and there you will find God.

Amen.