



Saint Peter's Episcopal Cathedral

April 30, 2023

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sermon - Hearing Voices

John 10:1-10

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Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

I don't know whether you all know this, and maybe when you think about it, it is not at all obvious, but as a person is discerning the call to ordination to the priesthood they are put through a battery of psychological tests. Ink block tests... long questionnaires... multiple meetings with a psychologist. After I took the Rorschach test, when I met to review the results I was told that I answered the what-do-you-see questions like most priests do. When I left that meeting, I left not really knowing whether that was a good thing, or not.

Then came the hours of completing psychological questionnaires. Question after question. 100s of them. Many times it was basically the same question asked in a different way. There was one question, however, that really caught my interest and in some ways, I guess, elevated my anxiety. And it repeated every 25 to 30 questions, or so it seemed, so it must have been important. And it wasn't asked differently to try to hide its intent to gage your honesty. It was simply put in a true or false format, in the first person, "I hear voices?"

Now, I wasn't a kid, and I had taken psychological tests before, but not within this context. Did I hear voices? No! I didn't hear voices. I couldn't imagine anyone answering yes to that question and thinking that they would successfully get through the process. But they kept asking it. Maybe it was a trick question. Maybe the question was meant to gage whether I had a personal relationship with God. Maybe it was a figurative question rather than a literal one.

Of course, we all know that it was a literal question and the answer had better be no. But then we arrive at the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John. It tells us that, as followers of Jesus, we are supposed to be able to hear and recognize our shepherd's voice, even today. We are supposed to be able to hear our Savior's voice. So maybe we should take a couple of minutes to understand what that looks like. How is it, unless our name is Moses or Elijah, that we authentically hear God's voice in our lives.

First, we hear the voice of our shepherd within Scripture. God's inspired word is more than a chronicle of written memories of things that took place in the past. I mean, it is that recording of experiences, but it is more than just that. Embedded in the words of Scripture is God's voice and God's truth that has been tuned to a believer's ears, both then and now. It is like a nuanced inflection that brings the fullness of the spoken word to our ears. Scripture is designed to strike a chord in believers that resonates within that space within us that is meant to hear. That is why Jesus often said, "Those who have ears, let them hear." Let them hear beyond the spoken word. Let them hear deeper than the written word. Let them hear God's voice for us.

And we also hear our shepherd's voice through prayer. The problem is that we often don't approach prayer as an act of receiving. When we pray, we typically embrace the output, but avoid the input. We often confuse prayer as a means of delivering a list of concerns, suggestions, and demands to God, but less often to listen to and to hear God.

The truth about prayer is that it is best understood as us orienting ourselves within a relationship so that we can best hear the voice that fills the world, and us, with God's message.

And we can also hear our shepherd's voice through other faithful followers of the shepherd within a community of faith. If there are other sheep in the fold that are always quick to be the first in line when the shepherd calls, and you have not well tuned yourself yet to hear the shepherd's voice for yourself, then watch those that are tuned in. Be a faithful member of the community as you listen and deepen your relationship with God.

But, there is another thing with our passage this morning. While it is telling us that there is a true voice, it also tells us that there is a false one. While it is telling us that we come to recognize our shepherd's voice, it also serves as a warning that there are other voices that come at us like thieves, not to steal our bikes off our front lawn, but to steal our lives away from the peace and joy we were made for.

I know that that is a message that we really don't want to hear. We like only stories that lead to happy endings. The fact is, however, that along with The Shepherd that we have been designed to hear, there are so many other great sounding so-called shepherds calling out to us from over the wall. And they all sound so good. They all sound so tempting.

Follow me and I will set you up in a position over others and give you power over them. Let me be your shepherd and people will do whatever you say and serve you in all things. Pretty enticing, right?

Follow me and I will fill your houses with treasures that will feed your egos and amaze your neighbors. You'll be the house where everyone wants to be. You'll be that person that everyone wants to be. You'll be the envy of all you know or know of you.

Follow me and I will make you a sports star, or a fashion model, or the guy that all the ladies want to be with, or for you ladies, the men. Follow me and I will give you all that the *world* has to offer. Follow me and you will be "happy" beyond your *earthly* imagination. You will have it all. You will be it all.

But Jesus has a warning for us today because, as with most parables, there are choices to be made. We want to focus on just the good part of the message. We want to think that the warning is for others. He is telling us, as he told them, through a story that is relatable to human life, that our hearing can become so clouded that we are in danger. He is warning us that these false shepherds that come at us from over the wall, these thieves that only desire to take us away from the abundance of the true shepherd, these liars that paint for us a false reality, they are all strangers to us, or at least should be. They are all strangers that are supposed to repel us. All those other voices strangers from whom we need to run.

When we hear their voices, we should be hearing the dissonance from the sound of creation. The sound of those shepherd wannabees should contrast with the peace and joy that God made us for. What they offer will not bring us to fullness. What they promise will not guide us on the right path. Those thieves will only serve to deceive and destroy.

We live in a world that is constantly telling us that we need to find our own voice. Dig deep within yourself and find your voice and scream it out to the world. Reach down into yourself, decide what you want and who you want to be, and go and make your mark on the world. The thing is, there is nowhere that I find that kind of teaching from Jesus. What I do find is Jesus telling us that we need to find our hearing, not our unique individual voice.

He is teaching us that we need to find our special, expanded, enhanced hearing because The Shepherd, our true and good Shepherd, is at the gate calling to us. We each need to find our hearing because THE Shepherd has a plan for each of our lives, and for our lives together in a Godly relationship that he is right now, right here, telling you about. Right now, right here, he is leading us to, if we will hear and follow.

We need to listen to THE Shepherd together, as sacred partners, because God has a mission for us. He is at our door telling us about it right now. It is the mission for us to bring the good news that The Shepherd is gently calling all people, everyone, to an amazing pasture specially made for all those who will hear and follow the one true Shepherd.

We are not supposed to be hearing voices, and when we do, we should run. But we are supposed to hear and listen to the one true voice of the shepherd that leads us to life itself.

Those who have ears...Amen