

A Familiar Voice

Psalm 23 & John 10:22-30

12th May 2019

Today, the Fourth Sunday in Eastertide, is often known as Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel lectionary is usually situated somewhere in John 10. Earlier in this chapter, and only here, we find the image of Jesus as shepherd, the shepherd of a sheepfold. The sheep hear his voice and are led through the gate into pasture. It's also a little confusing because not only is Jesus shepherd, the metaphor shifts and we find Jesus saying, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep...I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (Jn. 10:7-9). He will protect his flock because he controls the gate. Within his pasture, in the spaciousness and freedom of his pasture, we are called to live, and not only live but to thrive. "I came," Jesus said, "that they may have life"—*zoe* in Greek, meaning full life, rich life, meaningful life, flourishing life—"and have it abundantly." The shepherd gives life.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." Because, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11). The shepherd cares for the sheep. He knows how vulnerable they are. He knows there are wolves ready to attack, he knows there are thieves waiting to break in and steal. He knows there are bandits out there who want to rob them of their life. So he offers security. The sheep trust the shepherd. He's a familiar presence, with a familiar voice. "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me" (Jn. 10:14).

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Having lived in Scotland, and spending a lot of time there over the years, you quickly learn that one is never very far from sheep. They are everywhere. In fact, there are more sheep than people. According to the 2015 sheep census, there were 6.7 million sheep in Scotland. There are about 5.3 million people. In the Highlands, there are so many of them they block country roads and lanes. In the United Kingdom, overall, there are approximately 30 million sheep.

They really are beautiful creatures. They have a calming presence when looked at from afar, grazing the fields. The lambs are quite playful, especially this time of year, in lambing season, jumping around with joy. Sheep, though, are often skittish; they're nervous creatures. If you get too near them, if you come up along a field wall to try to get close, they run away. They're extremely passive. And, I'm told, that sheep aren't too smart. In the Highlands, they wander over the moors, eating their way through the heather, and end up lost or in danger or worse. And so while the sheep/shepherd metaphor is all over the Bible, especially here where Jesus is viewed as pastor or shepherd and we the sheep—given the nature of sheep, this isn't saying much for us. I know Christians who don't like being thought of as sheep. And while I am pastor or shepherd, and one could say that I have a "flock," I really don't think of church members as sheep.

There's something else about shepherding that is helpful to know. Depending upon what part of the world you're in, shepherds move the flock in different ways. In the Middle East, it's common for the shepherd to lead the flock. The shepherd gets out in front and the sheep follow. Jesus says, "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 because they know his voice" (Jn. 10:3-5). Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me" (Jn. 10:27). You can hear this in Psalm 23, as the shepherd leads us beside still waters and into pastures green. However, in parts of Europe, especially in the UK, the shepherd leads, or, better, drives the flock from behind and pushes them in the direction they need to go. Personally, I like this image better.

I remember, several years ago when I was walking the Camino across Spain, I saw something I've never seen in Scotland. I was walking toward a small village on the horizon, situated on the top of a small hill. I could hear a lot of noise of some kind off in the distance, and then my eyes focused on the fields to the right of the town. There were hundreds of sheep slowly coming down the hill, move through the fields, then crossing the Camino, crossing the road ahead of me, blocking the way, and then moving into another field. Behind them was a shepherd—a real shepherd, with staff and everything, something you rarely see in Scotland—pushing the flock, driving them forward, calling out to them. I just stopped there—because I had nowhere to go (and I didn't want to get trampled by the sheep), so I watched, with awe. And I thought of Jesus, as the good shepherd, who loves and cares for his flock, who protects them and watches over them, and with the sound of his voice sends them where they need to go.

Whether the shepherd guides from behind and pushes or leads the way and summons us to follow, there's something about the voice. Five times in chapter 10 there's a reference to the importance of listening to his voice, hearing the voice of the shepherd. Jesus is like a mother to us, his voice is like a mother's voice, a voice that right from the beginning offers comfort, assurance, but also orientation and direction. It's a voice that gives us life. This means, of course, that for us to hear the voice of the shepherd we have to stay near him. We have to stay close to him. We have to remain within reach of his voice.

I love this image because it highlights the relational dimension of the Christian life. Being a follower of Jesus is not only about belief or being "correct" about our theological ideas; neither is it simply about doing good things or behaving in such a way, being "Christian" nice. Jesus invites us to stay near to him, within earshot of his voice. When we do, belief will take care of itself and we'll know what we're being called to do, and we'll know where we are being summoned to love the world. Only then will we be able to fulfill the command made to Peter (John 21:15-19), which we heard last week, "Feed my sheep." "Tend my sheep." Care for my people—all of them. Feed my people—all of them. Love my people—all of them.

Jesus invites us to attend to his voice. Listen. As poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) once said in his poem "Ash Wednesday" (1930), "No place of grace for those who avoid the face/ No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice." It's the voice of the one who loves us, and the voice of this love is calling us and sending us and telling us who we are, and judging us, and correcting us, and guiding us, and leading us into the world, into ourselves, into "abundant life" (Jn. 10:10), into to the life of God. Later in John's Gospel, Pilate asked Jesus,

“So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” (Jn. 18:37).

And, so, Jesus invites to stay within sound of his voice. And this is easy to do, because this shepherd is good and his goodness has a way of pulling us in and drawing us close toward him. There’s something attractional about the voice. In fact, the Greek doesn’t really say “good,” but *kalos*, which means “beautiful.” He’s the beautiful shepherd or “attractively good” shepherd, which is what beauty is, attractively good; and it’s what beauty does, it attracts. Beauty is a good that inspires us, motivates us to move closer toward it. The beautiful is winsome, appealing, summoning us to move close. That’s who Jesus is as the good or beautiful shepherd, whose goodness and beauty makes it easy for us to stay close, leading us into goodness and life—a beautiful life.

Go down into the catacombs outside Rome and visit the places where early Christians worshipped, broke bread together, and buried their dead, and one of the most pervasive images you’ll see on the frescos adorning the walls and ceilings is Jesus as shepherd, carrying a sheep on his shoulders, wrapped around his neck. You won’t find crosses. But you’ll find images of Jesus presiding at the table and images of Jesus as shepherd, because that’s what spoke to people. It’s this image of God that resonated with people and summoned them and fascinated them and spoke to the depth of their souls. A lowly shepherd, a good shepherd, a beautiful shepherd, who loves and protects and provides, and even lays down his life for his sheep. Then, and now, he leads us—and sometimes even pushes us—toward the way that leads to life. If we but listen to his voice, stay close to him and trust, he will show us the way.