

The good shepherd
Menno Mennonite Church
May 3, 2020

Purpose: To proclaim the radical inclusion of God's love.

Message: as people of God's care, we are invited into the way of Christ in our midst, being welcomed by the good Shepherd who invites us in.

Scripture: John 10:1-10

Synopsis: The image of the good shepherd is one that we love dearly. We use the metaphor of Jesus looking after us, the sheep, a comforting and connecting sense of identity, sometimes using the "door" of Christ as a means of telling who is in and who is out. Yet the way things work with the sheep pen back then suggest a different option—a conversation about how we hear the voice of God in our midst. We are invited to listen for God together.

(Joh 10:1-10 NIV) ^{NIV} **John 10:1**"Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.

² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them.

⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.¹ They will come in and go out, and find pasture.

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

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The first thing I do in the morning is turn on the voices. I reach over and extinguish the alarm (assuming the kids, or right now the dogs haven't roused me out of slumber already) and start streaming NPR. Having grown up with it around the house, it is part of my morning ritual come what may. It starts the voices—the many voices that are with me through the day. All day long we are surrounded by voices—even here where we are not surrounded by much of anything. Voices of the news and opinion of the day. Of our friends, family. Of our thoughts and ideas. Of those things that our brain entertains that we would just as soon not consider even on the brightest day. We are surrounded by voices, including, we contend, the voice of God. Sometimes the best we can do is to listen to ANYTHING, giving ourselves a moment's peace, let alone pick out the voice of the one would come and bid us follow. How do we stop and listen, and pick out God's voice in the midst of the many competing voices of our world, let alone knowing it as Christ's and following it where it may lead?

This passage—John 10:1-10—is one that we know well, but something that we don't often think of as a narrative about voices and calling. Most of the time, when we abstract this text we come to it to establish the nature and boundaries that hold us fast, and hold this as a delineation of who is in and who is not. We understand the sheep fold as the place of security into which the elect are destined, and Jesus is the divine bouncer sorting along the way. This works because it is how we are used to the world working—an orientation of us versus them, and we know who is who. I recall many times people citing their credentials as sheep of God as a reason for someone else to be careful. I recall one woman complaining of a slight paid her by Airline security (remember commercial air travel?) ending her rant with “well; God know his sheep, and we'll see who's who in the end. Time and again we make the workings of the good shepherd about him taking sides and doling out divine justice here.

Except I am not convinced that this is the point that is being made here. I think this verse suffers on two counts—one, being extracted too far from the context in which it properly resides and two I think our assumptions about what's going on here lead us astray as well.

So first: context. I would encourage you to read a bit around this story today. This is actually a part of narrative that has its roots at the beginning of chapter 9 (given John's style well before that), but this is the beginning of the incident here. Chapter 9 tells the story of the man born blind that Jesus heals which sets off a whole series of explanations and recriminations for the formerly blind man, his parents, and onward until the man returns to Jesus after being rejected by

the powers that be. This conversation about the sheepfold is an extension of Jesus reflecting on the blindness of those who refuse to see the workings of God in their midst. In this context, Jesus the gate, the good shepherd, and the one who leads is the one who is offering an alternate vision of the righteousness of God to a disbelieving and baffled collection of religious folks. Jesus is identifying the uniqueness of his leading, the leading of the Spirit toward something new.

Second, as Emily explained, we need to know how all this works to understand it well. But what Emily didn't mention is that the sheep fold of the ancient near east was not a private corral where they could keep the flocks secure and separate, but rather a communal convenience where all the shepherds would secure their flocks where only the gatekeeper to mind them. We assume that this about a proper procession of the individual owner. Instead it is sheep potpourri with all of the flocks together. With that in mind, Jesus' metaphor of calling the sheep, and the sheep's ability to hear that voice and follow along is what is really being talked about here. In the days before ear tags, branding, and all the rest, this was how herds were maintained—the voice of the shepherd, and the shepherd's intimate knowledge of the animals of their care. That is how the herd come to pass, and that is how the herd moves forward with the shepherd; by knowing and being known and following out from the place of safety and shelter into the world following the one that they trust the best. Like a child who, after a time, is no longer satisfied no matter how loving a babysitter might be, but needs to be around mom again, the sheep would follow the shepherd, and only the shepherd by the mere sound of the voice presented them.

I submit that the metaphor of the gate and the pen is not about who will get in and who will be out, but how we know the voice of the holy in the midst of our madly braying world, and follow that voice as it leads. Jesus is saying here those who hear the holy, know the holy, and are formed by the holy, will follow that voice of the holy which he carried and he spoke so well. This metaphor is not about keeping people out; it can't be. The community which listens for the voice of the shepherd must **MUST** be open to all who come. The community of Jesus Christ, the one who leads the sheep, and calls to us still must be an open door because we know that Jesus welcomed Samaritans, Pharisees, the woman of Samaria, the Roman centurion, Nicodemus, the man born blind, the palsied man, Peter, Thomas, and even Judas who betrayed him. The voice of God speaks as it will to whom it will, granting abundant life and healing to those who would only hear. It is a free, open gift. The challenge is for us to hear well enough to know God's

working in our midst. Dare we continue to follow when Jesus is the one who calls us out of the fold; out of the place of safety, to come and follow along?

But how do we go about that? How do we train our ears to hear the voice of the Good shepherd calling us, let alone to muster courage to follow that voice perhaps into the wilderness where we are not sure we want to be? How do we sort out the voice of the master in the midst of the massively braying world? It is not easy; it can be a struggle to really know and really hear all that well. We must take the time to dwell with the shepherd, listen carefully and listen with each other to test the voice and discern together the calling of the loving God.

God's voice is one that is found in contradictions. It has the force of thunder, yet is often retiring and something we strain to hear. The voice of God is recognized wherever one sees life, joy, health, color, and humor, even as it is too recognized wherever one sees dying, suffering, poverty, and a beaten-down spirit. The voice of God is recognized in what calls us to what's higher, sets us apart, and invites us to holiness, even as it is recognized in what calls us to humanity, and in that which refuses to denigrate our human nature. The voice of God is recognized in what appears in our lives as "foreign", as other, as "stranger," even as it is recognized in the voice that beckons us home. As familiar as it may be, the gospel that only confirms what we ourselves hold to be true and good as we are right now cannot be gospel—at least not completely so. The voice of God is the one that most challenges and stretches us, even as it the only voice that ultimately soothes and comforts us. The voice of God is always heard in privileged way in the poor, even as it beckons us through the voice of the artist and the intellectual. The voice of God always invites us to live beyond all fear, even as it inspires holy fear. The voice of God is always heard wherever there is genuine enjoyment and gratitude, even as it asks us to deny ourselves, die to ourselves, and freely relativize all the things of this world.

In these days of newness and of things changing around us in ways big and small, I contend that the voice of God is speaking to us. I am not yet ready to venture a guess at what might be the words and meaning, but know that God's voice is calling to us both individually and corporately to come and be attentive to where Jesus is leading us. Listen closely. Listen for the voice of the shepherd, and now that the God shepherd leads us forth, and to the places of righteousness in this day and every day.

I want to leave you with an exercise. I want to leave you with the Shepherd as we know him—the richest vision we have from Psalm 23. As you listen, I invite you to note what speaks most to you both by way of comfort, but even more so by way of invitation. In listening, I hope that you might hear the shepherd calling us each to new life and new way in this day and in this time.

I read here from the Message:

- 1-3 **23** GOD, my shepherd!
I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.
- 4 Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.
- 5 You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.
- 6 Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of GOD
for the rest of my life.