

THE VOICE OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

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Meditation for Good Shepherd Sunday

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In the days before radio or television, it was common for folks to entertain by reciting poetry

On one such occasion, an English hostess asked a renowned actor to recite the 23rd Psalm

--he did so with all the polish and precision worthy of his profession

The guests rewarded him with polite applause

Another gentleman present was known to be a man of deep devotion

Several asked that he recite the 23rd Psalm as well

--he resisted, but finally agreed

When he spoke, the perfect elocution and mastery of the first speaker was gone

But in its place was the quiet conviction of one who walked with God

--the audience was moved

This time, there was no applause, just quiet, reverent appreciation

In the silence that followed, everyone wondered:

Why did the second speaker's testimony ring so true?

--the actor, being a consummate professional, knew the answer

"I only know the Psalm," he explained. "*He* knows the Shepherd"

Today, we have been blessed by worship offerings made by Knollwood members and guests

And to me, the power and beauty of these offerings was enhanced because those making them don't just know the Psalm. They know the Shepherd!

In the 10th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus unpacks what it means to know him in a vital, personal way

In doing this, he draws on the image of the Good Shepherd

--in this wide-ranging chapter, Jesus gathers up a thousand years of Hebrew faith and Scripture,

But it is the theme of Jesus' voice that holds the passage together

It is the power of Jesus' voice that ties him to his followers

--"My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me" (Jn 10:27)

I find this a comforting image

Because much of the time, sheep can't see their shepherd

--they can only hear their Shepherd

Huddled and bunched in a sheep's pen, they perk up at his call

--lost while wandering in some God-forsaken terrain, they listen for the Shepherd's cry

Trying to sleep through a long, dark night, they are comforted by the Shepherd's murmured reassurance

--when threatened by enemies, they are awakened by the Shepherd's shout

So too in the life of faith

We cannot *see* Jesus

--but in the presence of his shepherding love, we *hear* him call our name

In her book, *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of visiting a sheep farmer out west

The sheep farmer told her sheep are not dumb, as popularly believed

--that's a vicious rumor started by cattle ranchers

After all, cattle are herded by whooping cowboys on horseback

But sheep won't go anywhere unless their shepherd goes ahead to assure them everything is alright

--the difference -- said the sheep farmer -- is that you push cows, but you lead sheep

The Good Shepherd "calls his sheep by name and leads them out . . . He goes ahead . . . and the sheep follow him because they know his voice" (Jn 10:3)

And so as we navigate the "green pastures and dark valleys" of life (Ps. 23), we listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd

When the siren call of consumerism woos us to buy more stuff, Jesus warns, "Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. For what does it profit you to gain the world at the cost of your deepest, truest, God-breathed self?"

--when the old childhood demons of low self-esteem and even self-loathing come calling, Jesus asks us-- as he asked Legion of old -- "What is your name? Who *are* you?"

Then he draws near in the power of his risen presence to reclaim us as the child of God we are

When the voices of bitterness and resentment sound in our souls, Jesus teaches us to pray "Forgive us *our* trespasses as we forgive those who trespass *against us*"

When we're tempted to withhold our generosity, for fear there won't be enough, Jesus offers his counter-intuitive truth: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back"

When we are left exhausted and drained by an unforgiving perfectionism, Jesus whispers, "Come unto me all you who are weak & heavy laden & I will give your rest"

When we are tempted to play it safe, rather than stand up for those assailed by injustice, Jesus cries, "Woe to those who dot every "I" and dot every "T," religiously speaking, "but neglect justice and the love of God"

Yes, like sheep, we are ever prone to lose our way

So we need a Good Shepherd to make us "lie down in green pastures," to "lead us beside the still waters," and to "restore our souls"

--Thank God, in Jesus Christ that is what God has given!

Shortly before his death, the Jesuit priest and author, Henri Nouwen, wrote a book titled, *Life of the Beloved*

In it, he seemed to have a premonition of his death

"Am I afraid to die? I am every time I let myself be seduced by the noisy voices of my world telling me that my 'little life' is all I have and advising me to cling to it with all my might.

“But when I let those voices move to the background of my life and listen to that small soft voice calling me the Beloved, I know that there is nothing to fear and that dying is the greatest act of love, the act that leads me into the eternal embrace of my God whose love is everlasting”

As the sheep in Jesus’ flock follow him through the joys and challenges of life,
they
come to know, trust, and love him

Then in their own experience, the Shepherd’s promise proves true:

“I have come that they might have life! And have it abundantly!” (Jn 10:10)

Good and faithful Shepherd, thank you for being ever-present to lead and to guide.

Now give us hearts tuned to hear your voice above every other and the courage to follow your call. For only then can we know the abundant life you long to give.

In your name we pray, Lord Jesus, Amen.

