

Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10: 1-5; 11-18

Sermon for 4/25/21

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

This is now the third Sunday after Easter, and you may have noticed something about the lectionary readings that began on Easter Sunday, and will continue right through the whole Easter season up to Pentecost Sunday, still several weeks from now. What you may have noticed is that, instead of the first reading being something from the Old Testament, it's a passage from the book of Acts. The reason for that is pretty straightforward. The people who selected the lectionary readings want to emphasize the importance of *looking forward* from the Resurrection. And why is that? Because it is the resurrection of Christ that marks a new birth, a new beginning for all creation. The resurrection provides creation with a new set of values, a new understanding of meaning and a new guidebook for putting those values and that understanding into practice. (As an aside, it's worth mentioning that the Greek word that we translate as 'Acts' is 'praxaies' – praxis – the root of the English word *practice*.) The book of Acts is really the record of how the first Christians tried to put the meaning of the Resurrection of Christ into practice.

You may also have noticed that during this Eastertide season, stretching from Easter to Pentecost, almost all the Gospel readings are from the book of John, and that has a similar explanation. The first three Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – are primarily interested in telling us the facts about the life of Jesus and reporting to us the things he said. John, writing at the end of his long and reflective life and many years later than the other three, is primarily interested in showing us what these facts and words mean for us, living in their aftermath, and looking forward to our role in this new creation.

I think we can see this happening in our reading from John for today in the way John – using the words of Christ – provides us with a new understanding of one of the great images of God drawn from the Jewish scriptures but now to be applied to this new creation. I'm referring to the image of the good shepherd.

Let's begin by reading this passage together.

John 10:1-5, 11-18.

This is a very rich and suggestive passage, but for this morning, we'll just focus on two things.

The first is the stress Jesus places on the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep.

In the lovely 23rd Psalm, the shepherd is pictured as providing guidance and protection and eventual reward for his flock: *he leads beside the still waters...his rod and his staff protect...he anoints with oil and replenishes the wine cup.* And these are beautiful and wonderful reasons for faith and gratitude. But Christ emphasizes something in addition: the good shepherd lays down his life for them. He dies for them.

And why is that? Because he *owns* them.

The contrast is with the shepherd who herds the sheep that belong to someone else, the hired shepherd. When the wolves attack, the hired shepherd runs away. Why? Because they are not his sheep, they are not his personal possession.

Consider the difference between the relationship a mother has with her own children, compared to her neighbor's children. When one of her own children is sick, the mother puts aside all consideration for her own life or comfort, and devotes herself selflessly to helping her child recover. When one of her children is threatened, she will throw herself in the way of danger, without a thought to her own security. Why is that?

Because her children belong to her; their lives are bound up with their own, in a way the neighbor children are not.

The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep because they are his: his own life is bound up with theirs. He guides, protects and rewards them, not because he's being paid to do so, but because they belong to him.

In our reading from the Book of Acts, Peter and John have healed a lame man, and when brought before the authorities to explain their action, Peter declares that the healing was accomplished, not by their own power, but by that of the living Christ who was raised from the dead, and whom they simply represent.

It's the same point Paul makes to the Corinthians in his first letter: "You are not your own; you were bought with a price (1 Cor 6: 19).

And that's the Easter lesson for all of us as well. The death of the man Jesus was the price paid for us, that we might now belong to the resurrected Christ. We belong to him, as children belong to their mother, as sheep belong to the good shepherd.

Many might draw back from this message, fearing that it threatens our independence, our freedom for self-determination. But there is no basis for that concern. Belonging to your parents doesn't limit your freedom, other than by providing you with a source of loving protection while you mature, and a source of loving guidance while you seek to fashion a life worthy of the great gift of existence they've bestowed upon you.

And that brings us to the second lesson to be drawn from our good shepherd.

In the Middle East of Jesus's time, the shepherds guided their sheep through the mountains and valleys of the wild countryside, far from the shepherds' homes and villages. Out in that countryside for days and weeks at a time, here and there were crude shelters into which the shepherds could bring their flocks for the night for protection while the shepherds slept. Often there were several flocks herded there together. In the morning, each shepherd therefore had the problem of collecting his own sheep out of the mixed crowd in order to lead them back out into the wilderness to pasture. How could each shepherd gather his own sheep out of the crowd?

The answer is that each shepherd had a unique and distinctive call, a long, loud, warbling summons something like a yodel, the same call that would gather the flock together out in the wild if they had begun to wander apart, or if the shepherd sensed the approach of a wolf or a bear. That call was referred to as the *name of the*

flock. Each separate flock recognized that distinctive cry of its own shepherd, recognized its own name; so in the morning, when the sheep heard their owner's special call, they would emerge from the rough barricade to follow him, leaving all the others behind.

That's the image Jesus is using in our passage: *He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him, the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by their name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice...I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.*

Like all of you, I'm sure, when I remember my mother, I remember her voice. It's an utterly distinct voice, one I could pick out easily from all the tens of thousands of other voices I've heard in my life. And it's not just its tonal qualities that make it unique for me. It's the most beloved voice of my life. It's the voice I would trust more than any other. Why? Because I recognize it as the voice of uncomplicated, unconditional, and unlimited love...for me. I would know her voice anywhere, and I would follow her voice wherever it might lead.

That's the voice the sheep hear when their good shepherd calls to them. And that's the voice of Jesus for each one of us: the voice of perfect love.

Can we hear that voice today? Not with our physical ears, of course, though someday we most certainly will. But we can if we listen with the ears of faith. Paul says that, as Christians, we live by faith, not by sight. But he might just as well have said we live by faith, not by sound.

For now, we do not have his voice, but we have his words. And by faith, we know that those are the words of parental love, and that if we follow them, we can never go astray.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that you open our ears, so that we might hear and follow the voice that leads us into green pastures and by still waters and along paths of righteousness, the voice of perfect love, the voice of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.