

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
4th Sunday in Easter
April 13, 2008
John 10:1-10

The Voice(s) Calling Our Names

I am a part of an on-line community of clergywomen from all different denominations who live all over the county. On Tuesdays, we are invited to jot down and share any sermon thoughts for the upcoming Sunday. This week's edition of Tuesday Lectionary Learnings was called the "Baa Baa Sheep Edition" because today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year we encounter these texts full of shepherding imagery on the 4th Sunday in the Easter season.

Now, for those of us who live in a major metropolitan area, imagery of sheep and Shepherds may or may not be all that exciting. But for a young female preacher in Wyoming, it is a day that is always pregnant with the possibility of drama. "Shepherd Sunday can be rather interesting around here," she wrote this week, "with cattle-ranching being a huge part of the culture. I learned early on that there is quite a rivalry between sheep ranchers and cattle ranchers. On Shepherd Sunday a couple of years ago, one of the patriarchs of both our church and town, a retired cattle-rancher, whispered to me as he was going out the door, 'I have no use for sheep and sheep-ranchers.'" Needless to say, she preached on the Acts passage the next year when Good Shepherd Sunday rolled around.

But it is my guess that most of you do not have that kind of angry reaction to this image offered to us by Jesus. Let us remind ourselves of the set-up for this parable. We are back in chapter 10 of John's Gospel, in the middle of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was constantly upping the stakes in the conflict with the leaders of the day. He had just healed the blind man who, after the healing, was driven out of his synagogue because his healing was too threatening for the religious leaders to understand and handle. They did not get who Jesus was. They could not see who he was.

So now, with the healed man as a part of the gathered crowd, Jesus offers some imagery so that they all might be able to see him more clearly, to perhaps understand a bit more just who he is and what he was up to in the world. And, just like always, Jesus offers the imagery through a parable. He speaks of thieves and bandits. We learn about the shepherd. We are reassured that when the shepherd calls the sheep by name, the sheep recognize the voice and intuitively know it is safe to follow. But, Jesus warns, if a stranger tries that same trick, the sheep refuse to go with him because they do not know the stranger's voice. As a matter of fact, the sheep will run from that stranger, fearing for their safety.

At this point in the story, the Gospel writer tells us that Jesus paused, looked around, and realized that no one understood what he was saying to them. They must have all had blank looks on their faces. So, Jesus took a deep breath and tried again. This time, though, Jesus decided to be more explicit in what he was saying.

Jesus tells the crowd that not only is HE the shepherd of whom he is speaking, but he is also the gate to the sheepfold. We are the sheep. And, as the sheep, we are invited to go in and out of Jesus, finding safety in the fold, enjoying the pasture on the outside, and having abundant life. Jesus is also clear that any other leader who is clamoring for our attention and loudly calling our names will only lead to our destruction, and eventually, our death.

With his imagery, Jesus sets up a sharp distinction between himself and the thieves. He is the shepherd who intimately knows his sheep, calls them by name, leads them into the sheepfold for safety and rest, as well as out into the pasture for food and adventure. But the thieves, however, are deceivers and strangers; those who do not care about the sheep, who only want to exploit them, use them, and give them up for death. Jesus' mission is to offer abundant life, full of wholeness and healing. But the thieves' mission is to steal, kill, and destroy.

It all seems so clear when we lay it out like that, doesn't it? How could the people in that crowd not understand what Jesus was saying? We get it completely. If we had been there, I am sure that we would have all been nodding along with his words. He wouldn't have gotten blank looks from us. Not at all. We've got this sheep thing, this disciple thing, down pat.

We wait for the Shepherd. We listen for his voice. We go in and out of the fold, finding rest in the safety of God, then going back out into the pasture of our world. We have got this sheep thing, this disciple thing, down pat. Why on earth would we ever do anything else? Why on earth would we ever listen to any voice other than the good shepherd's voice? Unlike that first crowd gathered around Jesus, you and I have it figured out, don't we. Listen to the shepherd. Follow his voice. Don't listen to the thief. The thief means danger. Easy, right?

I am not convinced it is all that easy. We may think that we have this sheep thing, this disciple thing, down pat, but I am not convinced that we always do a good job of distinguishing between the voices we hear. I am not convinced we only hear the Shepherd's voice. Because it is a loud, loud world out there with many, many voices clamoring for both our attention and our allegiance.

It was not all that different for those disciples gathered around Jesus. They knew who Jesus was and what he was doing in the world. They were eye-witnesses to his miracles as well as the first ones to hear his teachings. And yet, the disciples were befuddled quite a bit of the time, seeming not to know or to hear, losing the ability to follow God's voice. Their ears would constantly get all clogged up with the voices of thieves and bandits. And, before they realized what was happening, they would forget to distinguish between the shepherd's call offering life, and the voice of the stranger leading towards death. Think about Judas and the betrayal. Consider Peter and the denials. Remember Thomas and the fear. Many different voices clamored for their attention and their allegiance. And sometimes, the voice of the stranger became the primary voice, clogging the disciples' ears and crowding out the voice of the Shepherd.

And so, I have to wonder, do our ears ever get clogged with other voices calling our names, clamoring for our attention and our allegiance? Before we realize what is happening, do we, like the disciples, simply forget to distinguish between the life-giving voice of the shepherd and the destructive voice of the stranger? What are those other voices that we hear calling our names, clamoring for our attention and our allegiance?

You know what voice I hear a lot these days? Fear's voice. Fear's voice is clogging up so many ears and dominating so many discussions that it is almost impossible to hear anything else. Have you heard Fear's voice lately? Sometimes Fear's voice is that little whisper that you hear as you wrestle with hard political issues like immigration policy here in Irving. You know you are starting to hear the particular cadence of Fear's whisper when the discussion changes from a discussion about policy and law into a discussion about "those people."

Have you heard Fear's voice make that switch? Somehow, when Fear starts talking, the God-given humanity of all those involved starts to get stripped away. The whole conversation transforms into an "us vs. them" conversation. When Fear's whisper takes hold around this particular discussion, and we let Fear's voice become THE voice of the conversation, crowding out the voice of the Shepherd, then we start to spend our days living protectively, instead of living freely. And we go in and out of the wilderness of anger and divisiveness, rather than in and out of the abundant life of the pasture.

Or, maybe you hear Fear's voice speaking with a different accent. Maybe you have heard Fear's voice when it starts singing a duet with the voice of Greed. Now, I am about to admit something to you and I pray you will not judge me for it. I watch reality television. I am almost ashamed to admit it to you, but I do. One particular show that has captured my attention lately is "The Real Housewives of New York City." It focuses on five women who live in New York and the wildly lavish lives that they and their families live. From houses in the Hamptons, to 10,000\$ dresses for opening night at the Met, to constant attention to the society pages and constant measuring how you are doing in comparison to the others—it is both fascinating and exhausting to watch. But whenever I watch it, I realize that Fear and Greed are constantly singing duets both on the show and

in my head. And sometimes the voice of Envy joins in as a descant. Last night I listened as one woman said very confidently—“Life is really no longer about keeping up with the Jones’. After all, we are the Jones’.”ⁱⁱ

Now, I realize that show is a hyperbolic crescendo of Fear and Greed’s duet, but I expect you hear that duet in your own ears. Regardless of what economic class you live in, the verdict in American life is that it is never enough. Research has consistently shown that both rich people and poor people are constantly anxious about their future (that is Fear’s alto line) and neither rich nor poor feel like they have enough (that’s Greed’s harmony). The great William Sloane Coffin preached about this duet when he proclaimed, “It is very hard to have possessions and not become possessive.” And when we find that Fear and Greed’s duet is starting to be the only song heard in our ears, and their voices are the only voices to which we listen, then we will spend our days living anxiously, rather than abundantly. We will go in and out of the wilderness of emptiness and despair, rather than in and out of the abundant life of the pasture.

I could go on and on. I am sure you could name many other voices of thieves and strangers that call your name and tempt you to follow. But let me stop and ask this question. If these are some of the voices of the thieves and if these are some of the ways we can get lured into the wilderness, then, as people of faith, what is our alternative? How does actively listening for the Shepherd’s voice make a difference? What is this pasture of abundant life we are promised when we do?

In all honesty, I do not know the answer fully yet. I have already admitted to you that I can find myself traipsing along after the thief just as much as you can. But, I also know that in moments of my life, I have been tuned into the Shepherd’s voice and tasted the fruit of Jesus’ promise. I have tasted the abundant life in the sheepfold of Mo-Ranch, resting in God, feeling fully known by God, enjoying God. I have tasted the abundant life in moments of being your pastor, sharing moments of deep joy and excitement, as well as moments of grief and good-byes. I have been tuned into the Shepherd’s voice and tasted the abundant life around the Table, when I have looked around at all of you and remembered that we have all been made family in Christ Jesus—all of us. I cannot tell you how many times on a Sunday morning I come in, feeling frazzled and harried, and then get up here, look at your faces and simply feel tremendously blessed.

And, I have been tuned into the Shepherd’s voice and tasted the abundant life down at the font—where we will gather in just a bit. We will all draw near to that water and, for a few moments, we will not hear Fear’s whisper; we will not hear Greed’s song; we will not hear any voices of thieves or strangers—the winds of the Spirit will simply blow them away. All we will hear is the voice of the Shepherd saying “This one is mine. And this one too. And this one and this one. I am the gate and the Good Shepherd and all of you belong first and foremost to me and I will not forsake you.”

For the heart of this parable is Jesus’ implication that we do know him instinctively. At a deep level, the sheep know the particular cadence of the voice of truth. At a deep level, because of God’s gift of faith, we intuitively know who Jesus is and when he is calling us forward towards life. Our job as disciples, our call as a church, is to help each other unclog our ears and listen attentively. Our job as disciples, our call as a church, is to help shake each other back into faithfulness so that we might listen deeply for the particular cadence of the voice of truth.

For when we do, I promise we will hear the Shepherd calling our name, inviting us home. “I am the Good Shepherd,” Jesus tells us. “And I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.” And when we are tuned into that promise, listening deeply for the cadence of truth, then all those other voices fade away and we are able to remember whose we are once more. And for a while, that becomes the only song we hear and the only one we sing.

ⁱ <http://revgalblogpals.blogspot.com>

ⁱⁱ This show is found on Bravo television: “The Real Housewives of New York City”