

## **“The Shepherd’s Voice” – John 10:1-10 – May 3, 2020**

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This image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is probably not new to us. Very often the figure of a shepherd has been used in reference to God and to those who lead God’s people. Psalm 23 is a familiar passage that refers to God’s shepherding qualities and the trust that God’s people have in following wherever God leads. Here in John’s gospel Jesus refers to himself as both the gate for the sheep to enter the sheepfold and the shepherd who protects the sheep from thieves and bandits. In the verses following this passage, Jesus goes on to describe the Good Shepherd as one who not only saves the sheep from wolves, but is willing to lay down his life to protect the sheep.

In this time of confusion and unsettledness, it is perhaps comforting to know that our Good Shepherd holds us close under his watchful eye. And if we would only listen to his voice, we have confidence in knowing that he will not lead us astray.

And in any normal time, I think that would make us feel very secure. But this isn’t a normal time. The flock has been jolted out of its normal reverie and is milling around in unfamiliar territory. What was once taken for granted – food, supplies, routine, good health, stable employment – is no longer a given to be expected. The pastureland has been inundated with brambles and pitfalls and risks. and that has caused a great deal of unrest among the flock.

There is a definite feeling of tension among the sheep. Everything we thought was safe has become suspect. Many of the sheep are focusing only on their fears, worrying about the wolves and predators that threaten the sheep’s safety. Others are spreading rumors, exacerbating the fears. Some sheep would rather believe the wrong answers than to have no answers to their many questions. With all the supposed facts and opinions being flung about, we don’t know what or who to believe.

And in the midst of our own confusion and turmoil within the sheepfold, it becomes harder and harder to know where the Jesus-gate is. The voice of the shepherd is being lost amid the cacophony of voices of uncertainty, impatience, and mistrust. We bumble around in the dark, fixed in our own little places within the sheepfold, longing for connections we cannot have, and we strain to hear his voice.

As strange as it sounds, sheltering in place is exhausting. We just want this to be over. We want to send our kids back to school, go back to working in our offices and places of employment, we want to go to the state parks but with open bathrooms, we want our leaders to deal with the health crisis without inserting politics into it, we want to visit with family and friends – in person. The lack of all those pieces of normalcy is tiring. Like I’ve said previously, our bodies are expending energy trying to maintain our safety in all the uncertainty.

In a time when hearing the voice of our shepherd would be most comforting, we find ourselves wading among multiple distractions and trying to shut out the non-helpful voices.

So how can we hear Jesus' voice among the din of competing sounds? We hold on to what we already know is true. We remember our teachings, our studies, our familiar prayers. What words do we already know by heart? The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth. Be still and know that I am God. Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. When the distractions overwhelm us, those things we already know and trust will give us strength and stability.

Not just the words, but the community of the faithful, too. While we cannot be together in person, we are together right now, in common fellowship. We sing these hymns together, our voices seeming so frail in our living rooms, but echoing with the eternal angel choruses. We join one another in Zoom meetings and Google hangouts – places we never even knew existed six weeks ago. We laugh with our family and friends over the phone. We spend time writing letters and addressing cards each word filled with love. We wave at our neighbors and friends from the streets or the sidewalks. We take care of each other by wearing masks in public and staying safe at home when we would rather be out in crowds of people. We pray for each other. We mourn losses together. We celebrate joys. It may not happen in ways we are used to, but the community of faithful listens to our shepherd, and we create new ways to be together.

And this day, though we are apart physically, we will gather at table together. We will break bread, and share the cup, knowing the God's gracious gifts are not bound by time or space. God's spiritual nourishment is not limited to one holy place. But any place, any setting, any element – through God's action, may become holy. And so let us gather and let us listen for our Shepherd's voice.