

John 10:1-10

Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The Voice of the Shepherd

Many of us grew up with an image of Jesus the Good Shepherd which might have looked something like this:



Perhaps it was hanging on the wall in the Sunday School of your childhood. European Jesus carrying the lost lamb in his arms; an image that provides a sense of comfort and security for children.

Shepherding however, for most of us, is a foreign concept. The serene meadows with sweet fluffy sheep ambling peacefully while their shepherd relaxes on a rock nearby...these pictures are nice, but they're nothing like real life, and not at all what Jesus had in mind when he used this image to explain himself.



We need to think differently about shepherds and shepherding. Being a shepherd was a dangerous job, and a hard life, as shepherds faced all of the hardships of the hostile landscape through which they herded their sheep – tough terrain full of predators, thieves and bandits.

We also need to notice that this passage of scripture comes on the heels of Jesus' healing the man who was born blind, and the unrelenting questions and threats Jesus received afterwards. The authorities were already looking for a reason to kill him, and this is only intensified when the man who was healed declares that Jesus must be from God in order to have healed him.

You see, there were, in those days, many false prophets, and many claiming to be the Messiah, and John wants to make it clear that Jesus **is** the Son of God, the one true Messiah.

But then Jesus takes us deeper. Because Jesus as the door to the sheepfold, and the shepherd himself, is not just about Jesus' relationship to God, but is all about his relationship with us – his care for us – his protection.

And that's the good news. For as hard as it can be at times to follow Jesus as our one true shepherd, it's better than being prey for the other thieves and bandits who will try to take that position in our lives – who would lead us astray from the flock, lead us away from the fold.

And the only way we'll be able to follow the Shepherd, is by listening to his voice – by knowing his voice. Because there are plenty of voices competing for our attention and affection, which can easily drown out the voice of our Good Shepherd.

These days there are the many voices delivering the news. We hear the voices of Hollywood and Disney when we watch movies or television. We hear the voices of opinion writers in the papers. We hear the voices of bloggers on the internet. We hear those voices and more, every day.

And as edifying as these may be.... None of them will lead us to the abundant life God has for us. And I don't mean some far off and future time or place. God's gift of abundant life is for us right here right now – especially right here and right now.

Because when we hear his voice, we know who to follow, and we find ourselves on a journey marked by joy and peace that can only come from God. Even still, it's hard – not only to recognize the Good Shepherd's voice, but to understand what he is saying to us.

But here's the thing...the most important thing about this sheep-shepherd relationship. The shepherd calls his sheep by name and they follow him because they know his voice.

Being in the sheepfold means that we are known by the shepherd, that we are called by name. You see, the Good Shepherd – the Door of the Sheepfold – isn't Jesus' job description. It describes his relationship with us – which is one of knowing, really knowing each other.

It's kind of like when I introduce Mike as "my husband." I'm not telling you much of anything about him, but rather "whoever this is, this is my relationship with him." The name / title is the relationship.

And the nature of our relationship with Jesus is one based on trust – immense trust. Trusting the good shepherd means that Jesus leads us to what we need, not necessarily what we want. Trusting him frees us to enjoy all good gifts, abundant life – which is usually far beyond anything we can imagine or want. And it is an abundance that no thief or bandit can take away.

Have you ever known someone who has an inner joy and peace – such that even when life throws the worst at them, they seem to have an inner source of strength and optimism that amazes you? Maybe you are that person. That's the abundant life Jesus is talking about.

So the question for us is: Whose voice do you follow?

In 1957 a young actress/teenager made her acting debut opposite Elvis in the movie *Loving You*. Delores Hart was her name, and she went on to act in 9 more films. In 1959 she had 9-month run on Broadway. She was engaged to an architect. Her life's trajectory seemed to be on a predictable path.

But Delores was also a faithful Catholic, and when she was 23, she went on a retreat to a Benedictine convent in Connecticut. And she discovered her true calling. She joined the convent where she still lives today. Her calling was clear – the voice she followed was God's – in a big way! The co-author of her autobiography said in an interview that the most important thing for an actor is to listen. And so the title of her autobiography is, *The Ear of the Heart*.

It's an intriguing question: Whose voice do you follow?

At the start of WWII (1934), the churches in Europe were not exempt from the influence of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Many pastors were silent – turning a blind eye. And the churches were not the safe sanctuaries they ought to be.

But there were some pastors who saw the situation clearly and who spoke out against it. They wrote a statement decrying what they saw happening in the very church they loved and served.

It's called the Barmen Declaration and it's short – just 6 main points derived from scripture. The first lifts up these verses from John which we heard – and makes the summary statement: *Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.*

It's an important question: Whose voice do you follow?

In 1999 I was leading the youth group in Acton and the kids had a friend who committed suicide. So one Sunday shortly afterwards that was the topic for the night. Well as the evening unfolded, it became clear that the kids were worried that their friend had gone to hell. I asked where they had gotten this idea. And they said the movie, *What Dreams May Come* (in which one of the main characters commits suicide and does go to hell).

This was so sad to me, for two reasons: 1) that they believed that people who commit suicide go to hell; and 2) that they were letting Hollywood be their teacher and authority in religious matters!

It's a crucial question: Whose voice do you follow?

Because hearing and following the voice of the Good Shepherd – means NOT following other voices. And the “other voices” are unavoidable.

Because, for all the safety of the sheepfold, we're not meant to stay there forever. Did you notice that? Three times in the passage:

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (v.3)

When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them. (v.4)

They (the sheep) will come in and go out, and find pasture. (v.9)

We need to be attuned to hear Jesus' voice not just in the safety of our time together in worship, or in quiet moments of prayer; but out and about – out there! And even though there's not much "out there" happening for us these days, still our lives are to be oriented "outward," toward others.

As Jesus leads us out....

As you make decisions in your life...

What your priorities are,

How you spend your time and with whom,

How you run your business and interact with your co-workers,

How you spend your money,

How you treat your friends,

How you treat people who are NOT your friends,

All of these ought to be a direct result of your relationship with your Shepherd – or more accurately His relationship with you.

Do you hear him? Because he's not just calling you; he's calling you by name. And when we're called by Jesus, and by name, it always leads to abundant life.

Lazarus, come out! And he saunters forth from the tomb.

Mary! And her grief becomes the fertile soil for resurrection to take root.

Simon, James, John! And they follow the one who invites them to turn not just their lives, but the whole world upside down.

You too. You'll hear Jesus' voice when you're in your rooms and on your walks; around your tables and in your cars.

The truth is that we DO hear Jesus' voice, when we listen with the ears of our heart. Try letting HIS be the loudest voice in your life. Because of all the voices we have to follow, his is the only one who died for you.

And it always leads to abundant life.

Amen.