

The Good Shepherd

a sermon by Pastor D. Thomas Ford, Jr.
Salem Lutheran Church
Glendale, CA
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John 10:

[1] "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber;

[2] but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

[3] To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

[4] When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

[5] A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."

[6] This figure Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

[7] So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

[8] All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them.

[9] I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.

[10] The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

[11] I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Grace be unto you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Risen Christ!

One Sunday a young Pastor was giving a children's sermon about the 23rd Psalm. He told the children about sheep, that they weren't smart and needed lots of guidance, and that a shepherd's job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering off and doing dumb things that would get them hurt or killed.

He pointed to the little children in the room and said that they were the sheep and needed lots of guidance.

Then the minister put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows said to the children, "If you are the sheep then who is the shepherd?" He was pretty obviously indicating himself.

A silence of a few seconds followed. Then a young visitor said, "Jesus: Jesus is the shepherd."

The young Pastor, obviously caught by surprise, said to the young visitor, "Well then, who am I?"

The visitor frowned thoughtfully and then said with a shrug, "I guess you must be a sheep dog."

Sometimes I feel like a sheep dog. And I think that's how many pastors feel sometimes—like an animal running about frantically trying to bring together into one happy herd sheep scattered in all directions, each having a mind of his or her own, and quite capable of zigging when you want him or her to zag. And zagging when you hope for a zig.

So, maybe we all, sheep and shepherd or sheepdog, as the case may be, need to take a breather this morning from all the frantic comings and goings of our fast-paced, fear-filled, anxious lives and listen for The Good Shepherd's voice. A voice that speaks Good News to and for each of us. A voice that speaks clearly, calling us each by name. A voice that indeed invites us to follow the way to abundant life.

The problem is that we can't always distinguish the Good Shepherd's voice from all the other voices speaking to and around and from behind and in front of and from above and below us.

Several years ago a woman awoke in the middle of the night to desperate, cries of "Help! Help!" She got out of bed and, following the sound of the cries, headed into the living room. "Where are you?" she called out. "In the fireplace," was the reply. There, dangling in the fireplace flue, was a burglar stuck upside down. Police and firefighters eventually freed the would-be thief. What did the homeowner do while waiting for help? What did she discuss with the burglar at 2 AM? Perhaps she gave him a stern reading of John 10:1:--"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in by another way, is a thief and "a bandit."¹

Not every voice we hear is the Good Shepherd's voice. And I'm not talking about just the voices in society. I'm also talking about the voices within our own hearts and minds. Voices that speak about little things. What shall I buy her for Mother's Day? Voices that speak about great things. How shall I answer if he asks me to marry him? Voices that speak about money and sex and politics and alcohol and raising children and caring for the elderly and going or not

¹ Lindy Black, Sermon Nuggets, <http://home.twcny.rr.com/lyndale/Easter4A.htm>

going to war and ordaining or not ordaining and gay or lesbian people. About out-of-control consumerism and the tendency we have to seek our own happiness without regard to the needs of others. Voices that speak about what I could be doing in the church that I'm not doing now, or what I could be giving that I'm not giving now. Voices that speak about that old grudge I've been nurturing all this time and that maybe it's time to let it go. Voices that speak about old hurt feelings and why I'm still holding on to them. All these and many many other voices.

Is it the voice of The Good Shepherd, or of something else?

The Good Shepherd said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"³

How do we tell? Some of us believe The Good Shepherd tells us that the church should bless same-sex marriages. Some of us believe The Good Shepherd tells us we should only bless opposite-sex marriages. We do not each always hear the voice of The Good Shepherd in the same way. What are we to do?

Canadian Pastor Richard Fairchild answers: "The important thing is not that we come up with 'THE ANSWER' but that in listening and struggling with the issues in our lives and in the life of our [world] that we live the answers that we already have been given by our Shepherd...like these given by the Holy Spirit to the Apostle Paul when he wrote to the Thessalonian Church: God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up . . . Live in peace with each other... Encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. . . Our Shepherd's voice is clear about how we should live and act. It is clear about what our attitude should be to those who are both our friends and those who we might regard as our enemies. And if we have trouble figuring out just what the Shepherd is trying to tell us about the big issues within our families - and our society and our world - we cannot go wrong by doing those things that the Shepherd has already told us to do in a clear and obvious way - and trusting that . . . no matter what dangers surround us - that if we keep on following the voice we already know . . . our shepherd will keep us safe and bring us to God's house where we will be able to dwell forevermore."

The voice of The Good Shepherd is nothing less than the voice of Love. We've heard it many times before. We can recognize it anytime we listen with our hearts. It is the only voice to follow.

Before we sing about it, let me close with an illustration.

³ John 10:27

Russian Poet Yegveny Yevtushenko's autobiography tells how, in Moscow in 1941, Stalin thought to get some action going to energize the war effort against Nazi Germany. He tells of people mostly women, lining the streets and waiting for a parade of German prisoners who had been captured in battle. The atmosphere of hatred was palpable. Nearly every woman had lost husband, father, brother or son, and now was their chance to desecrate the symbols of those who had killed their menfolk. The flock had been gathered to vent its anger and hurt...to find solace in some kind of revenge.

The Germans came into view "... thin, unshaven, wearing dirty bloodstained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades ... the streets became dead silent. An old woman pushed through the crowd, past the police cordon and, taking something from her coat, pushed it into the pocket of an exhausted soldier - a crust of black bread. And now suddenly from every side women were running towards the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people."⁵ These soldiers of the enemy were also men and boys, husbands, brothers and sons.

Even in the most extreme circumstances...the shepherd's voice is discerned in the brave act of one person which can rally us to transcend our anger and our fear and act not with vengeance, but with compassion. And love.

Now, let's sing about it! "The King of Love My Shepherd Is."

⁵ Yegveny Yevtushenko, Almost at the End (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1987) p. 25.