

Sermon: HEARING, KNOWING, FOLLOWING

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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.

—John 10.1-10

Being a Christian is a whole lot more than just believing in Jesus, having certain opinions about Jesus, like that he was the son of God. Being a Christian means actually *following* Jesus. Partly that means following his instructions, applying his teachings to our lives. But it also literally means following Jesus *himself*, sensing Jesus moving in our lives and hearing Jesus call to us in a way that evokes our own response so that we get up from where we are and follow him in what he is doing so that we can be close to him.

Now that's not easy because Jesus isn't here in bodily form the way he was in Galilee. Jesus is in spirit, Jesus is in the community, but not in a way that we can reach out and touch very easily. So we have to listen for that voice.

That's not easy for us either because there's a lot of noise in our lives. It's hard to listen for the voice of God. We're going so fast, we're so busy, we've got radios and TVs and podcasts and everything going. It's really hard for us to stop and listen. And I know life is busy, you've got obligations. We had three boys; I know what it's like. But you know what? I bet there's nobody who doesn't spend ten or fifteen minutes a day doing something that you don't need to do—probably having to do with a TV or a smartphone—that you couldn't spend instead stopping to listen for the voice of the good shepherd.

Prayer is one way that we can stop and listen. In our prayers, kind of like in everything else, we're used to *talking* to God. We're not as accustomed to *listening* for the voice of God in our

prayers, just being still and listening for what God is saying to us. It takes practice, it takes days. It takes a lifetime of listening. We're not going to hear very often in words; it's going to be something else.

Reading scripture is a way of listening to God, not just reading in order to understand, not so that we know something *about* Jesus, but so that we *know* Jesus, so that we hear that voice talking to us. We read listening for what God is saying to us in that scripture.

But even in prayer and searching scripture, how do we know that what we're hearing is the voice of God and not just the voice of our ego, our fears, our desires, our habits, our beliefs? There's a lot of voices in our heads. How do we sort that out?

Jesus said a couple of things that are pretty striking. One is, "The shepherd calls the shepherd's own sheep, not somebody else's, and calls them by name." Listen to a voice that knows you, that knows who you are. Knows all of your faults and failings and knows all of your giftedness. Listen to that voice.

The voice that says you're not good enough, that's a thief and a robber. They've only come to steal. Do not listen to that voice. The voice that says you need to be somebody other than who you are – that's a fake. Don't listen to that voice. Listen to the voice that loves who you are.

Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." Listen for the voice that's life giving, not the voice that chips away at your life. And Jesus says, "The shepherd calls them out." Listen to the voice that calls you to something.

The 23rd Psalm says some things about that calling. When we think of the psalm we usually think of it in terms of that green pasture. "The lord is my shepherd who makes me lie down in green pastures." That's part of it. But if you read the whole psalm, it's really a psalm about a journey. We get to lie down in the green pastures; we also get led by the still water. We get led in the paths of righteousness, the path of loving, the path of mercy and justice. And that path doesn't always stay in the green pastures. The very next verse in the 23rd psalm leads us into the valley of the shadow of death.

One of the ways that you know that you're hearing the voice of the good shepherd is that the good shepherd is not afraid of the dark. There are voices that say, "God wants you to be happy and rich. Good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people so if you live a good life you will be rewarded. If you live a good life you won't need health care." Have you heard that voice? Don't listen to it. The voice of the good shepherd is not afraid of the valley of the shadow of death.

I know some of your struggles. I know how hard it would be for you to hear a voice that couldn't take seriously some of the heartbreaking questions, the failures and the losses and the discouragement and the despair that each one of us feels sometimes in our own ways. Sometimes we feel it together as a world. It's a dark valley when the values that begin to ascend stand in direct contradiction of everything Jesus taught – love, humility, generosity, honesty, self-giving, non-violence. When we see attitudes that go against grace and seize power, that's a dark valley.

We've seen dark valleys in this church. We've struggled with difficult issues and budget shortfalls and staff cuts and what do about the sin of racism and black lives matter signs in the yard and disagreements. Jesus is the one who stays with us in those dark places. Lord knows, this year Saint Matthews has gone through the valley of the shadow of death. We keep losing people who are important to us, people that we love. It's not only heartbreaking but shocking to lose them. It makes us think, "How can that be?"

The good shepherd is the one who does not abandon us when we're in those dark places but walks with us, weeps with us, doesn't come up with some scatter-brained story that "This is part of God's plan." God's plan is that we live long, loving lives. And sometimes it doesn't work that way. Sometimes diseases happen and accidents happen. That's not God's plan. God's plan is that we love. And the good shepherd walks with us even when it doesn't go according to plan.

That's half of the good news. The other half is that that is not where the trail ends. The path of righteousness leads us often through the valley of the shadow of death, sometimes because we have lost people that we love and sometimes because we are asked to give of ourselves and sacrifice in ways that can feel like death. But the path always goes on to a new place where we find ourselves at a table that God has prepared for us, even right in the face of our enemies. There are all those things that tear away at our lives, all of those forces that oppose us, even death itself—and right in front of their face God spreads a table of blessing for us and invites us to come.

That blessing is how you know it's the voice of the good shepherd, the voice that always leads us closer to God and God's heart. The journey is never over until we can say, "Now I am in the house of the Lord and I will dwell here forever." That's the voice that we follow. That's the blessing that's going to flow from this Baptism for little Emily, this beautiful baby. It's very easy to promise her still waters and green pastures. It's a little harder to promise that there will be one who will go with her every day of her life and lead her through the valley of the shadow of death.

But that's part of what we promise. She's already thinking about that. We have to promise that there will be times when she will lose people that she loves and we promise that God will be with her in that. And we promise that God will ask her to let go of some things that she doesn't want to let go of but in love she will do that, and the good shepherd will help her and lead her to the table of God's banquet, this blessing. That's the voice that we want her to be able to hear.

So when we baptize her it will remind us that we are given to one another to love each other so deeply that she grows up knowing love when she see it, knowing the voice of love as surely as she knows the voice of her own mother. That's the voice that we all follow. That is the voice of God saying, "I am real. I am here. Pay attention to me. Listen to me." That's the voice that we want to hear. If we listen it leads us always closer to God.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house, the intimate presence of God forever.

