

**May 12, 2019 Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
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**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

When I think of the Parable of the Good Shepherd and this teaching from Jesus in John's gospel...I am so often taken with the simple power of speech...of voice...of speaking, hearing, and listening.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me,” Jesus says. Sheep know the voice of the shepherd...hear it...and follow. It is their lifeline, their tether to their identity, their community, their safety...their survival. And the shepherd knows the sheep.

Every time these passages come to us where characters are shepherds, or shepherding is the metaphor for God and God's people...it is easy to try to overcompensate for how little many of us really know about what it is to be a shepherd...more or less a shepherd in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine.

We do know, of course, that shepherding isn't the idyllic pastoral image that has been painted in so many soft oil paintings of lush green fields and waterfalls...where the shepherd is always standing peacefully still...usually wearing some kind of vest...(not really sure if that's standard issue shepherd uniform or what...)

Palestine is hilly and rocky and dry. Shepherding there means wandering to find the pasture you need. Hoping for enough water. It's no wonder the ideal images in Psalm 23 are of a place with green pasture and still water...and maybe we don't often think about how that ideal was probably described in the psalm because of how far it was from the experience of the people who first heard it.

Sheep do have an amazing capacity to identify the shepherd's voice...but they aren't so bright about lots of other things. They get lost...Sometimes they need someone to chase them down. Maybe you've seen the photo online of a

shepherd trying to pull a sheep out of a thicket...yanking full force on its two back legs...while it's upper half is totally buried in the grass...Sometimes it comes with the caption: "Some days Jesus has to shepherd me like this."

Sometimes we are not easy to shepherd, we know. I know. I relate to that image of the stuck sheep in the grass. Though...I actually saw a sheep image more recently that felt a little more true to my life. This one is a video of a sheep that had somehow walked into a tire swing (one of the ones where the tire is perpendicular to the ground, not parallel). And it could walk a few steps...but then it would get picked up off the ground and swung back the other way. (Just google sheep in a tire swing...you'll find it.)

I'm sure it had no idea how it got there or what was happening to it...but I feel like I can relate. Sometimes I am far too stuck and confused to even know what is going on...and I can try going somewhere and just feel mysteriously yanked backwards... flailing in the air...

Sometimes we hear and want to follow, but we get ourselves stuck...And our shepherd always comes back for us...Psalm 23 says that his goodness and mercy pursue us...they chase us down. When the shepherd's voice isn't enough for us to dutifully turn and follow...maybe because we won't...sometimes because we can't...he knows us well enough and loves us enough to come find us.

That the shepherd knows and calls to us is an amazing source of hope that sits at the center of this parable. That we can hear and follow our shepherd's voice...

Listening. Speaking. The importance of a voice...

The importance of listening and speaking is easy to find in the church's life, too. We read Scripture in community...aloud. For the word to be read aloud and heard assumes community and relationship. The word catechism...and catechesis...the fancy old church words for learning and sharing the faith...literally means something like "to sound in the ear." Again...it implies a

voice that speaks and then is heard...it assumes a relationship. There are parts of this journey most of us simply cannot do alone.

God gives us to each other...so that we can learn to listen...and to speak...to find the power of our voice...and of listening to the voices of others.

This has been central to the Missional River journey that we've been on for almost a year now. A small team of us has been going through a multi-step process...and hopefully, if you've been here, you've felt invited in along some of the steps of the journey so far.

Fundamentally, we have been learning about listening...and speaking...but mostly listening...more deeply to scripture...and to one another...and to our neighbors...those who may be nearby but whom we don't always think of...or to whom we aren't as connected.

It seems to me that, often, the church is in the mode of speaking (especially perhaps clergy who get the cool rock star microphones)...but really the whole church. Perhaps this is partly the cause of some of the harm we have done throughout history. We have set foot on new lands...and begun to speak of what we claim is true...before listening to a new story...to where our truth might be woven with the truths of others. Those of us with microphones and power and opportunity may have sometimes spoken so much that we forgot we were in a room full of people with voices and stories to share...and the story would be richer and truer if we simply realized that having the microphone in our hands to begin with didn't mean it needed to stay there.

So...the listening team has been learning about...well...listening...And you know what...even just as we began listening more deeply to each other and to scripture...it has been kind of awesome to see what has opened up that had been there all along.

You can ask anyone from the team if you want to hear about their experience...That would be Daniel Villarreal, Maureen White Eagle, Betty and Ernie Klatt and myself.

Or perhaps you've experienced it already, too. We've spent more time listening deeply to scriptures...the same one many times. Every week of Lent on Wednesdays we heard the story of the Road to Emmaus and reflected on it. The congregation council has been hearing the Parable of the Good Samaritan...We've read it together at least...what...four times now?

It's amazing how sitting still with the same voice...and really listening...for a good long time...will keep revealing more and more.

It takes me back to Jesus' words: "'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.'

We hear the shepherd's voice...and we learn to listen...to follow. But Jesus also already knows us so fully. And based on what we have learned happens through listening...I believe part of Jesus knowing us is that Jesus listens to every thought of our hearts...holds it close...like a treasure...Jesus knows us.

Jesus knows you like the song you played on repeat until every beat and lyric is seared into your memory. Jesus knows you like a concert violinist knows their instrument's every timbre and touch. Jesus knows you like a parent who can pick your cry out on a crowded playground before they can even see you. Jesus knows you like the friend who can hear in your voice that you're not okay even when you say you are. Jesus knows you.

We are each so loved and so known. And part of this journey of faith is learning to trust that our shepherd's voice will find us when we need it to lead us to safety...even when we go through the great ordeals, like the ones gathered around the Lamb's throne in Revelation.

Jesus' voice will find us and Jesus our Shepherd will shelter us and claim us as his own...no matter what.

Thanks be to God. Amen.