

Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10
Psalm 23

Anyone who has ever been intimately involved in raising children knows how quickly parents learn about the meanings of their babies' cries. There's one cry for "I'm hungry" and a different one for "I'm tired and need to take a nap" and still another for "I'm mad!" As the children get older, most parents can recognize their own child calling "Mom" or "Dad" even in a crowd and they can often tell by the sound of the call whether or not their child is in distress or is just looking for them. Even as the children age, parents can read the sound of a child's voice. When our daughter was in college and called home, my husband could tell by her opening word what was about to happen. If she started the conversation with "Hi Dad," she just wanted to touch base and would quickly become very chatty. If she started with "Daddy?" my husband's reply was invariably, "How much is this going to cost me?" And when our son calls and starts the conversation with, "Hi Mama," I know that everything is fine. If he starts off with, "Mom," I know he's got something serious to discuss with me.

The voice is a powerful indicator of identity. And that's what Jesus talks to us about this morning. In our Liturgy, this is Good Shepherd Sunday. It is the day that we set aside to identify Jesus as our Good Shepherd.....our protector, our provider, our caretaker. And it is his voice that we are to recognize.

In the gospel this morning, Jesus provides us with a rich a multi-layered metaphor. He talks about the Good Shepherd.....the recognition of the sheep of the sound of the Shepherd's voice.....of the gatekeeper who allows the Good Shepherd into the sheepfold to lead the sheep out. The sheepfold is an enclosed area where the sheep of several owners can spend the night in safety. As morning comes and the owners arrive to claim their own sheep, each sheep will follow the voice of his own master. The Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name and they recognize him as their master and they follow him.

He leads them out to rich and abundant life. He leads them to green pastures where they can eat and to cool streams where they will find water. He rescues them when they are in trouble. The sheep will follow the Good Shepherd because they recognize his voice. They will not follow the voice of a stranger.

And yet, there are so many voices calling to us and promising us abundant life in one form or another. We are bombarded by competing voices telling us that if we buy this product, we will be attractive. If we follow this nutritional regimen we will be slim and healthy. If we buy this

car, we will be seen as powerful and successful. If we graduate from this school we will be well-informed and insightful. If we go to this vacation resort, we will be refreshed and rejuvenated. If we invest our money in this company we will become rich and financially independent. The list is almost endless of the voices literally screaming at us that they can improve our lives.....that *they* can give us life and life abundant. But these voices bombarding us are the thieves and the bandits. These are empty promises. They are the very voices that call us away from the one voice who promises and also provides us with life abundant.

Let's take a look at this passage in context. When Jesus talks to his followers about the Good Shepherd and abundant life, he has just given sight to the man born blind. Not only has Jesus provided him with physical sight, but he has opened the man's eyes to Jesus' identity and his vision. The man born blind suddenly sees Jesus for exactly who Jesus is. He has been on the fringes of his community and when he is no longer blind, he is thrown out of the synagogue.....of what little community he had known before. Jesus gives him sight and calls him into a new community.....a community of inclusion, of acceptance, of love, of safety and of grace. That's what salvation is. It is not just the forgiveness of sins, it is the invitation.....the calling.....into the inclusive and reconciling and accepting kingdom that Jesus envisions. The man born blind has been given not only sight, but vision and he has been called forth into community by the Good Shepherd himself. He has heard the voice. And he has recognized it.

So the question comes to us, how do we hear the voice of Jesus? How do we learn to listen for that voice? How do we recognize that voice when we hear it? How do we know it is Jesus speaking to us and not the voice of a stranger?

Just like small children and their parents, we need to listen to that voice *every day*. First of all, we need to be silent. We can't hear when we're speaking and we can't hear Jesus when we are ruminating about events in this life that make little or no difference in the long run. We need to set aside time every day just to be still and be silent even if it's only for a few minutes. When we make it part of our routine, it becomes second-nature to us. It becomes the most important few minutes of the day, not something that is keeping us from doing something more important. For those of you who have long commutes every day, being stuck in traffic is a God-given opportunity to turn off the radio and tune into Jesus.

We need to read scripture.....to read the gospels in particular. How is Jesus speaking to the Pharisees? How is he speaking to the sinners? How is he talking to his disciples? What language does he use? What tone of voice do you imagine he uses? Try out several different ways of speaking the words that Jesus speaks and see if the meaning of his words changes for you.

Spend time talking about Jesus with others in your faith community. The Holy Spirit teaches us that we can learn about what Jesus sounds like by listening to other believers. It's called

discernment. We figure out Jesus' message together as Jesus speaks to each one of us and as we listen to each other.

We can learn about Jesus' voice in the teachings of our church.....in the great theologians past and present.....and the great writers whose imaginations give us insight not only into the meaning of Jesus' words, but the sound of his voice as well. We can learn about Jesus' voice through the works of artists and through music. Jesus speaks through many art forms. Jesus speaks directly to our hearts and directly to our emotions.

And we can learn the sound of Jesus' voice through people we love, particularly when they tell us the truth. It is in their voice and in their words that we often find the voice of Jesus. Sometimes they speak words to us that are hard to hear, but if those words are the truth, we know it.

And we can hear Jesus' voice in the prompting of our own conscience.

If we want to be able to hear Jesus' voice in the crisis moments of our lives, then we need to be listening for it in ordinary time. Search for some themes in all that Jesus says. You know that he speaks of forgiveness and of self-sacrifice and of life and of light. He speaks of faithfulness and of perseverance and of trust. When you've spent time in scripture, you will find that at any given moment a snippet of scripture will pop into your mind when you are contemplating some current life problem. Sometimes Jesus speaks even when we think that we aren't listening.

There are many voices competing for our time and attention. Some of them come from the culture at large. Some of them come from internal tapes that we play inside our own heads.....tapes that we loaded long ago.....tapes that are often inaccurate or manipulative or cruel. Any still small voice that comes to you that 'puts you down' is *not* the voice of Jesus. You may, from time to time, discover that you are being rebuked by Jesus, but you will never be 'put down' by him. He does not demoralize or destroy. He does not make fun of us.....ever! He chastises, but he does not banish. He corrects and guides, but he does not abandon.

Remember that more than anything else, the voice of Jesus is laced with the words "I love you!" We are enough for him just as we are. He has told us that he comes to bring us life and to bring it abundantly. And Jesus keeps his promises.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.