

“The Shepherd’s Voice”
John 10:1-10
Rev. Liz Kearny
Longview Presbyterian Church
May 3rd, 2020

“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.’”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This week, I was reading an article in the Wellness section of the Washington Post by psychologist Jelena Kecmanovic, who is witnessing firsthand in her patients how this pandemic is impacting our collective mental health. The following was under

the heading, “Difficulty focusing”: “Humans have evolved to focus their attention on a threat — that’s how our ancestors survived dangers in their environment. Because the coronavirus threatens our health, livelihoods and way of life, we are consumed by reading and watching news about it and by thinking about ways to protect ourselves from it. The problem is that we might also need to be teleworking, home-schooling our kids and attending virtual meetings. “The brain can do only so much. When our attention is absorbed by coronavirus, we will have a harder time concentrating on anything else we are trying to do in the moment,” said Jonathan Abramowitz, a professor of clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina.”¹

I like to think of myself as a pretty industrious, focused person most of the time. So it was validating to hear that the sheer number of voices flooding our days right now is a major contributor to the difficulty I am experiencing trying to focus. Because the brain can only do so much. We are saturated with many voices right now. The voices on the news. The voices of our family and friends over video chats processing together what this is like. The voice telling us even as we work double time trying to reinvent what it means to be a teacher or a small business owner or a healthcare worker or a parent that we still aren’t creative or effective enough to support those in our care.

And in the midst of this cacophony of voices that range from helpful and informative to destructive and shaming, it can be hard to hear the voice of our shepherd Jesus. And I think Jesus knew this as he spoke to his disciples about flocks and sheepfolds and

¹ “ Pandemic anxiety is making us sleepless, forgetful and angry. Here are tips for coping.” by Jelena Kecmanovic,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/anxiety-coronavirus-sleep-memory-anger-focus/2020/04/03/61dab1b0-75b9-11ea-85cb-8670579b863d_story.html

gates and shepherds. In John 9, leading up to this passage, a man born blind had been healed by Jesus only to be brought multiple times before the Pharisees for questioning. Nevermind that Jesus had transformed this man's life by giving him a gift he'd never had: sight. The Pharisees could not find it within themselves to respond with celebration or joy, but instead responded with interrogation of the healed man and his parents, legalism that could only see that this healing was wrong because it had been done on the Sabbath, and drawing a line in the sand to show that neither Jesus nor this healed man could possibly be welcomed into the community of faith. There are voices like these mixed in with the chorus surrounding us each day. Critical voices that tell us we don't have what it takes to meet the challenges of this time. Dividing voices that are relentlessly policing who is in and who is out in this season when our fear makes us point fingers of blame. Incessant voices of anxiety that will never let us be, but keep us awake at night with worry.

These are the voices of strangers Jesus tells us about, voices of those thieves and bandits that come only only to steal and kill and destroy. Like the Pharisees, these voices do not have our best interest at heart. They climb in over the wall because they have no intention of bringing us peace or joy or safety, but like predators and profiteers, many of these voices seek to drain us of life and gain from our downfall.

But the shepherd's voice is different. The shepherd's voice is one that calls us by name. The shepherd's voice leads us out beyond where we might be comfortable to follow in ways we didn't know before. The shepherd's voice is the one we hear just ahead of us, not far off in the distance, but just the next step ahead,

helping us know how to do the next right thing. The shepherd's voice speaks so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. If only we could recognize this voice above the others in this time of storm.

I was thinking this week about what it takes to recognize someone's voice. Something that has happened nearly every week that we have all been on Zoom together, especially in those early weeks, is that when someone would join the call before their video came on or simply by phone with a number we didn't recognize at first, we would only hear that person's voice. And one of the things I have actually savored in this time is that moment when the voice on the call suddenly clicks and I think, "Oh! That's Nancy! That's Sue! That's Majeane! That's Paul!" Yes, your pastors know you by your voices and you have no idea the joy that fills us when we reach that moment of finally recognizing that you are here with us.

But that joy of recognition didn't just happen overnight. We know your voices because of every potluck where we have shared stories with you across the table. We know your voices because of every joy or concern you spoke into the microphone as we prayed each Sunday in our sanctuary. We know your voices because of every committee meeting where you have shared your ideas or made plans to make ministry happen together. We know your voices because of every time you've said "May the peace of Christ be with you!" during the weekly party that is the legendary Longview Pres. passing of the peace. We know your voices because of every moment we have gotten to spend with you, big and small, meaningful and fun, everyday and

holy. We know your voices because of our life lived together in conversation, in good work, in prayer, in laughter, in relationship.

And I think it is the same with getting to know the voice of our shepherd Jesus, especially in this time when so many other voices overwhelm us. I heard someone say this week that we are NOT all in the same boat, but rather we are all in the same storm. This storm impacts everyone in a different way. Some are reveling in the privilege of quiet, restful time at home. Some are aching because their parent is in a home that cannot receive any visitors. Some have no idea what to do since losing their job. Some have seen the retirement savings they were depending on plummet. Some have never been more overwhelmed by the stress of work now that they need to completely reinvent how their job is done. Whatever boat we find ourselves in during this storm, I believe this passage invites us to spend time with our shepherd Jesus so we can begin to recognize his voice. We do this every time we join in Tuesday Zoom fellowship and prayer, hearing Jesus speak through our church family's words of solidarity and encouragement, through the chorus of "You hear our prayers, O God" that reminds us that God is listening. We spend time with our shepherd when we set down the phone for long enough to go on a walk around the block to hear Jesus' voice speaking in all the things that are still growing and blooming. We spend time with our shepherd when we invite Jesus into the stress of our jobs that feels impossible to bear, when we cry out to Jesus asking him to give us what we need to do the next right thing.

Family of God, I do not know where we are headed. But I do know that this time of sheltering is what we are called to so that we can someday go out and come in and find safe pasture. So

that we can follow Jesus, who is not only the shepherd but the gate, not shutting tight to keep some people out, but opening wide so that all are welcome to come in and find safety. May we hear in this time a special invitation, whether we are scared or exhausted or bored or anxious, to start relying on our shepherd in a new way so that when we are called into fresh paths of ministry, we will recognize the voice of the One leading us on. Amen.