

“The Calling Voice”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Psalm 23; John 10:22-30

My dad can snap his fingers really loud. I don’t know how he does it, but it came in handy when I was a little boy. If got we separated from each other in a public place, like a store, where there was no direct line of sight between the two of us, my dad would snap his fingers, which was his signal for me to come to him, and I would home in on that sound and find him. Sometimes, we were pretty far apart, so dad would keep snapping his fingers every ten seconds or so, until we were reunited.

Now you might think there were lots of false alarms, when somebody else would snap their fingers, and I would home in on that snapping sound only to discover it wasn’t my dad. Yet, hard to believe as it may be that hardly ever happened, because to my ears, my dad makes a very distinctive sound.

Even now that I’m all grown up, if I’m in a public place and hear a finger snap, my ears perk up, even though I know my dad is hundreds of miles away, but I never move toward the sound, because a split second after hearing that snap, a little red signs goes off in my brain that reads, “Not dad.”

And even to this day, when we’re together and go someplace and get separated from each other, occasionally my dad will snap his fingers when he wants me to find him. That might irritate some people, but it doesn’t bother me, because grown up as I am, he’s my dad. Besides, why would I want to wander around aimlessly looking for him? Why would I want him to wander around looking for me, when the guy can just snap his fingers louder than a firecracker and bring us back together again?

All this immediately came to mind when I read from John's gospel earlier this week, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." When we get separated from Jesus in the noisy marketplace of ideas and demands that surround us, the distinctive voice of Jesus calls each of us to come to him. Jesus speaks our names, penetrating through the busy buzz of worries and preoccupations, so that we can be reunited with him. And he does so because he loves us like a good father loves his children, like a good shepherd loves his flock.

You see, it disturbs Jesus when there's no direct line of sight between us. It bothers him because there are threats. We could be harmed or taken by forces much more malevolent than anything a little child might encounter in a crowded store. And Jesus is determined, more than any earthly parent could be, to protect us from harm and guide us to a place of safety and peace.

Of course, things happen in life that make us wonder about that, because we often find ourselves in great danger. We suffer terrible pain. And those frightful experiences make us wonder where Jesus is, and why he hasn't come to rescue us and take us away from those awful moments. We wonder, "Where was the voice of Jesus when I made that bad mistake or fell victim to the wicked choice of another person. Where was the voice of Jesus, bringing me to shelter, when a co-worker or a classmate or a friend or a family member or a perfect stranger inflicted harm on me? Where was the voice of Jesus when I was lost and looking for him, but could not find him?"

Sometimes, we answer those good questions by blaming ourselves or others. It was my fault, we think, because I didn't listen well enough. I'm to blame, because I didn't know how the voice of Jesus sounds. And sometimes, that's true. There is much to distract and deafen us from the voice of Jesus, and if we do not listen on a regular basis, it can be hard to recognize his voice when we hear it. But many times, we blame others or ourselves falsely, because we so

desperately desire answers to those pressing questions of why and how such awful things happen. Jesus doesn't want us to carry the burden of that blame, whether it's deserved or not. Shame and blame just interfere with our ability to hear Jesus, because they cause us to question whether we are even worthy to be called by Jesus by name.

Casting aside shame and blame frees us from self-incriminating voices. Casting those aside frees us to listen for the distinctive voice of Jesus and to follow where it leads: green pastures, still waters, right pathways, the house of the Lord where we are invited to dwell forever. Jesus is the good shepherd of Psalm 23, who watches us closely and calls out to us when, for whatever reason, we cannot see him. Jesus is the good shepherd who revives our souls and travels with us through the valley of the shadow of death, guarding and guiding us. Jesus is the good shepherd whose goodness and mercy follows us all the days of lives; the good shepherd to whom we belong, as part of a flock promised renewal of life.

And that last part is important. We are part of a flock, and that proves indispensable to hearing the voice of Jesus. Now it is true, and a great blessing, that we can hear the voice of Jesus in solitude. For instance, the practice of silent prayer helps us focus on his voice. We can even hear the voice of Jesus when we aren't focused on listening for it. Going about our normal day, the voice can come through, calling to us loud and clear. And the more we listen, the better we hear, and the better we hear, the more we listen, until the distinctive voice of Jesus is instantly recognizable, able to penetrate through the racket of modern life.

Yet sometimes we are when preoccupied, it helps to be part of a flock, because while solitude is good, going it alone in isolation is not. There is no such thing as an individual Christian. Jesus left as his legacy no building or book, at least not one we've found yet. Instead,

he left behind a community of committed disciples, ready to support each other and hold their brothers and sisters in Christ accountable for their baptismal covenant.

Eighteen years ago, Stephanie and I were fortunate enough to travel to Great Britain, and we spent a few days hiking in a part of Wales where the British special-forces train, and afterwards, I understood more fully why they picked that terrain for that purpose. We got lost, and I confess that it was due to my insufficient map-reading skills. Of course, getting good and lost on a hike is part of the fun – that’s my story, and I’m sticking to it – because you get to see things you didn’t expect to see.

Among the many delights we discovered were herds of sheep, and I noticed one flock being led by a shepherd. He was calling out to them, and the whole flock didn’t respond all at once. At his first call, a few heads popped up to look at the shepherd, and when he called a second time, a few more sheep stopping grazing and gazed at him, and then the whole flock started slowly moving toward him.

The point is, together, we will hear the call of our shepherd more readily than if we were alone. In fact, even when many of us do not hear the voice of Jesus, some of us will, and trusting in one another, we will move toward the voice that seeks to bring us to where we need to be, the voice that seek to bring us to the place we can find what we need the most.

You know, looking back, I wonder how much of my precious time would have been wasted in utter frustration, looking for my dad in the grocery or the department store, if we didn’t have this little homing system worked out, thanks to his fingers, snapping loudly with a sound that was special to me. I also wonder how many precious moments I have wasted, lost and frustrated and in trouble, because I didn’t listen for or didn’t hear the voice of Jesus calling me to where I needed to be.

Life is too short to shut our ears or to allow meaningless noise to fill them. Life is too short to deny that we belong to Jesus, just as surely as a sheep belongs to a shepherd. Life is too short to be a lone sheep when a helpful flock beckons to share its companionship. May the voice of Jesus resonate within our hearts always, that we may follow him and find our way home.

Amen.