***“They Know His Voice”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, May 3, 2020

**Ezekiel 36:24–27**

24I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. 25I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

**John 10:1–10**

“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. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

We are like sheep who know and love our master’s voice, because the master knows and loves us. We will not follow a false Messiah, whose voice we do not know. Jesus refers to some who came before him who were thieves or bandits. This could be a reference to some eccentric would-be Messiahs who came into Judah around the time of Jesus. One of these characters was named Judas the Galilean. He advocated refusal of taxes to the Romans and his group apparently committed assassinations. Other would-be prophets claimed that God would miraculously help them to drive out the Romans. These movements were quickly put down by the Romans. Jesus is disassociating himself from these false Messiahs, and probably from their support for military revolt. Jesus taught a different way, a way of spiritual nurturing, symbolized in his saying about the sheep going out and finding pasture.

There is something very distinctive about Jesus’ “voice,” that is, his teachings, and his style. We who know his voice, don’t seek salvation from any other voice. We have developed a taste for him and his teachings. We have experienced a change in our lives since we started taking his sayings to heart. Something within us recognizes the good news that Jesus proclaimed. We know that he sent a new spirit into the world on the day of Pentecost, and we believe that our partnership with this Spirit of Truth is what transforms our lives.

Some of this transformation even happened in Old Testament times. The prophet Ezekiel speaks of an inward spiritual change. God says “From all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you” (Ezek 36:25–27). Ezekiel is emphasizing a change of nature from stubborn selfishness and stone-heartedness to loving-kindness and compassion. This is something he must have witnessed among some of those who heeded his prophecy.

Notice that he links stone-heartedness to idolatry. God needed to separate people from idols as part of that process of changing their hearts. Before he could put a new spirit and a new perception for truth within them, he had to cleanse them from idolatry. Any obsession that takes us away from God and away from a compassionate heart, is an idol. Sometimes idolatry meant conforming with a pagan environment, done in order to bolster one’s social connections. The same thing can happen to us, the temptation to do whatever is needed to foster business connections or popularity. It is driven by fear of rejection. Such short-sighted and cynical motivation make us stony-hearted. Spirit gives us a “heart of flesh,” as Ezekiel says: a more kindly and responsive heart.

To us, Ezekiel’s prophecy certainly sounds like a foreseeing of the new Spirit of Pentecost. I think it can be both a description of a change of heart that Ezekiel was able to witness in some people, and also an anticipation of a new spirit that was not poured out until centuries later. The Spirit that came on Pentecost truly changed many lives, and it informs our lives today. It gives a certain depth to our faith, our inward experience of truth. The Spirit helps us recognize the truths that Jesus taught.

Jesus is the gate to a new way of living, one that is spiritually nurturing, and which extends throughout our lives. He can give us life, and life more abundantly. There are no shortcuts, which is the way of thieves. Jesus’ way is a way of transformed living, of forsaking selfish idols, of losing the hard heart for a softened one, of abandoning violent ways for non-violent ones. Christianity did eventually conquer the Roman empire, but it did it non-violently. Unfortunately, some of the converts retained their old ways, their old materialistic and political idols, and their way of forcing their will upon others. Thus did Christianity become infected with coerciveness and violence. So some of the voices that we need to recognize as wrong voices are ones that claim to be Christian, but are in reality unloving and coercive. These are like the strangers from whom the sheep will run, knowing their voices are not the true Shepherd’s.

It still is true that there is only one true Shepherd, and his Voice still tells the right way of finding abundant life. It will always involve willing participation on our part in an inner transformation and the renunciation of idols. It will involve a Spirit that teaches us compassion and responsiveness. It will always involve room for self-correction and learning, for that, too, is necessary for the abundant life. There is no abundant life that is wholly selfish, for that is a form of idolatry. Abundant living always involves loving relationships.

Listen to Jesus’ voice to get abundant life. The way to renew yourself is to listen to the words of Jesus, and attempt to draw close to God, trusting and confiding in God at all times. We can pray, as the Psalmist, “At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me” (Ps 69:13). We hear the steadfast love of God in the words of Jesus that teach us about being receptive to God. If we do the work, we will be appreciated by Jesus, as when he said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt 5:7–8). If your heart needs to be more pure, allow Jesus to work on it. He is the gateway to all our future life.