

4 Easter, Yr. C

April 17, 2016

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Rev. 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Every year on this 4th Sunday of Easter, there's a reading from John about the Good Shepherd. Today we hear that part of John in which Jesus says that his sheep hear his voice and follow him. Just a note about sheep (and every year I find myself saying that I really don't know a thing about sheep) – apparently, sheep really do know their shepherd's voice and when different flocks have been grazing together and need to be separated, each shepherd gives his unique call and, sheep that belong to a particular shepherd will only answer to his voice and come only to him. Jesus' contemporaries would, of course, have understood his allusion much better than we do today. But we certainly DO understand what it means to hear and follow the voice of the person we have chosen to be our leader, our shepherd, as it were.

I'd like to suggest that all the scriptures today revolve around this central point. They're all about the kind of life that's open to us once we hear Jesus' voice and follow him. It's laid out in the Gospel, illustrated in the psalm and Peter's behavior in Acts and comes to a culmination in Revelation, at that final gathering of worship and praise in that state where the shepherd brings us to the water of eternal life and where suffering and tears are no more.

Let's start with the Gospel. It's helpful in this case, to understand the physical context. John tells us that it's the Feast of the Dedication and Jesus was walking in the Temple. This feast is better known to us as Hanukkah and you may remember that that's the celebration that commemorated the victory of the Maccabees over the Greeks 150 years previously and re-lighting the lights of the Temple. That victory was surely in the minds of the Jews gathered around Jesus, who were now subject to a different occupation, that of the hated Romans. It's also really helpful to understand this reading, to look at the text before we come in at verse 22 and an additional sentence after the reading we have before us. In the two verses before our reading, John says that the Jews were debating about who Jesus was. Some thought he was possessed by an evil spirit, and therefore, crazy, and others were saying, no, that can't be because no evil spirit would have been part of healing the blind as Jesus had done. So, and I can appreciate this, they want to KNOW. Just tell us – are you the Messiah? Jesus says he has told them, but they don't believe, and he's shown them by the things he has done, but that hasn't convinced them either. This text leaves us wondering what would have happened if Jesus HAD spoken clearly – but in the last sentence, he says, The Father and I are one. And the following verse, which we don't have, tells us what happens with plain speaking – they tried to stone him for blasphemy.

I think there are a couple of really relevant questions here. First, the need for certainty before we're going to follow and second, the question about whose voice we're even going to listen to. The certainty issue first. These folks were divided. Some of them probably just wanted to trap Jesus, but some of them probably sincere, want to know – just tell us in plain language: are you the Messiah or not? What's behind that question? First of all, remember the victorious military backdrop I mentioned earlier. One problem was that many people just wanted Israel to get their worldly power back – get rid of the Romans, regain the power and glory they had when David

was King. These folks had an idea about leadership that was pretty narrow – they wanted a conqueror. And this was NOT what Jesus was about. But then there's another layer, I think. What are we asking for when we ask for certainty? I think it's a matter of wanting to avoid trust and commitment. So -I want to KNOW that you're the one I should follow, so I don't make a mistake and put my eggs in the wrong basket. I want to KNOW so that I'll be on the winning side. I don't want to commit before I know. And that's another contemporary conversation, isn't it? A very human question. But Jesus, in response to that kind of question, says that, as far as your relationship with Jesus and God, in order to know, you have to believe, you have to belong. And it's in the kind of life that follows believing and belonging that you'll come to know. And that requires stepping out in trust.

In one of his writings, Frederick Buechner talks about this and wonders what would happen if one night God spelled out a message with the stars, something like I EXIST. He thinks that the initial reaction would probably be "shock and awe" – some people would fall to their knees in humility, some would weep in regret, some would faint with terror, some would rejoice. Churches would be so full, he says, that we'd have to move to football stadiums – at least for a while. And then, to keep our attention, God would have to juice things up a bit – maybe add flashing colors and stirring music. But then, perhaps, one day, someone would say, "What different does it make anyway?" And things would go back to normal. Because, Buechner thinks, and I think he's right about this, we don't just want certainty, we don't just want to know intellectually that God exists, we want to experience God's presence in our everyday lives.

That's what the psalm is about. You'll note that it doesn't say that there won't be danger, or shadows, or death, or enemies. There will be. But in spite of that, in spite of the fact that terrible things happen to good people and bad people alike, we can be assured that God is walking with us, that he will never abandon us, or as Jesus says in today's reading, we'll never be snatched out of his hands. It's Easter all over again – that in the end death and despair are defeated. In the end, life and love win.

And then there's the other question, – whose voice do we hear; whose voice are we willing to follow? This scripture couldn't be more relevant in this election season. First, who do we hear? Remember the Charlie Brown TV specials in which, when an adult was talking all the kids heard was something like, "Wah, wah, wah"? What do we hear and what do we tune out?

I was on vacation for a couple of weeks and at one point was in a very crowded restaurant in Madison with my daughter and her family. There were voices all around – and you couldn't hear a thing! In the middle of that cacophony, someone's phone rang. And everyone heard that. Maybe if Jesus had a special ring-tone, we'd be able to pick his voice out more easily. But as it is, there are lots of competing voices: whether it's Madison Avenue trying to sell us something we don't want or need, or politicians trying to convince us that THEIR leadership will be best, or the culture telling us that status and security now, in this life, are the only things that matter, and that we should see our fellow humans as competitors in the game of scarcity – if they get it, I won't... But none of those are the voice of Jesus.

Jesus' voice lays out a completely different vision. It offers a different invitation. His voice reminds us that we have only this one precious life and we've been chosen by God to use this

life to help heal the creation and bring about the kingdom. Jesus' voice reassures us that God is walking with us. It asks us to be aware, in every choice we make every day, that we can choose for more life and more love, or not, choosing instead for selfishness and sin. Jesus' voice asks us to live out of confidence in God, not out of anxiety, it reminds us that each day we make choices, about who we notice, who we care about, how we spend our time and money. That voice, the shepherd's voice, asks us to choose generosity over bigotry, inclusion over prejudice, forgiveness over hatred, attitudes of joy over despair and of trust over fear.

How do we get there? How do we get to the place where it's Jesus' voice we're hearing and his way we're following? Look for a minute at Peter – the one who doubted, who was confused, who betrayed Jesus and yet the same one who was forgiven and redeemed, the one who heard Jesus ask if Peter loved him and when he said Yes, that he did, was told to feed the sheep. And here he is in today's reading, following in Jesus' footsteps, raising the dead and including the outcast (that's the throw-away line at the end about Simon the Tanner – definitely someone who would have been seen as unworthy, unclean, someone of no account.) This new Peter, who heard Jesus' voice, is living a new way.

What about us? How do we get to that point? With God's help. God wants us to be in a loving relationship with him. God wants us to choose him, to pick out God's voice. I think we begin by wanting that same thing. Wanting it enough to recognize that, as Augustine said, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Wanting it enough to be intentional about asking God to help us hear and see him in our everyday lives. Wanting it enough to listen in Scripture, or worship or study. Wanting it enough to try to see the face of Christ in all our brothers and sisters. Someone has said that we just have to take one step toward God and God will come all the rest of the way. God is waiting. We just need to take that first baby step. Amen.