

SHEPHERDED

John 10:1-18

A Sermon Preached by Robert E. Dunham
The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
Fourth Sunday of Easter May 3, 2020

I was watching the news of the beaches in Florida re-opening last week and had a flashback memory of the only vacation I remember taking with both my parents – a summer trip to Daytona Beach. I was five or six years old, and in those days before Interstate highways we had made the slow drive across Florida for a few days on the other coast. While we were there my father and I had walked up that beach where they let cars right out on the sand and had gone into some store on an errand for my mother, who was back at the beach cottage with my baby brother. The store was air-conditioned. We didn't have air conditioning at home, and neither did many other places in Florida in those humid July days, so I can still remember feeling the cold air on my face coming right out of the window unit. It felt so good I decided I would park myself right there and enjoy that blissfully cool air for a moment.

I was very much enjoying it, too, until I realized that my father had not stopped to enjoy the breeze. He had gone on into the store without me, and now was out of view. My father was a stern person, a former army sergeant, who expected me to keep rank and file right behind him, so I went after him in a hurry. Down one aisle, up another. Around a corner, down yet another aisle. But Dad was nowhere to be seen. There were lots of other people there, none of them familiar, none of them offering to help me in my growing sense of panic. I was running furiously through that sea of people and voices and noises... until suddenly I heard a familiar word, in a familiarly resounding voice: **Robert!**

Over the next ten seconds or so I heard my name three times, in progressive crescendo, until Dad's location was no longer in doubt...until all the other voices seemed to be silenced while people tried to discern what all the shouting was about. In that moment, I felt a strange admixture of great relief and mortal fear, knowing on the one hand that I had found my father, but knowing on the other that I had found *my father*, who would not take my disappearance lightly.

This week, reading in John's Gospel about the shepherd who knows us, whose voice we know, I once again thought of my father's voice, about the importance of voices in our lives. There are voices that have the capacity to stir deep feelings in us. Voices of a loved one at the other end of a phone call, who needs not say much to bring a smile. The strong voice of a parent calling our name – sometimes a happy sound, sometimes striking fear and trembling within us. The voice of an infant crying in a room full of children, a voice so singular that the child's mother knows instantly it is her baby crying. Sometimes even the voice of a stranger; some years ago a good friend and I took a cab from midtown to the Riverside Church; we were talking on the way, when the driver suddenly turned around and said, "Listen to you two! Where ya'll from?" He turned out to be transplanted from south Alabama, and he said it did his heart good to hear a "familiar voice," even though we

weren't familiar to him at all. Voices that bring recognition and a sense of place, of belonging. Or voices which, by their silence, let us know we are not welcome.

Remember Kent Haruf's touching novel, *Plainsong*? Victoria Roubideaux is a young, adolescent girl, not old enough to be out of school, but old enough to be pregnant, which she was. Victoria's mother recognized the symptoms of her daughter's morning sickness at breakfast one morning and knew the girl was pregnant. And Victoria knew that her mother knew. Later that afternoon, after making the long walk home from school.

She tried the door, but it was locked. Mama? She said. She knocked once. Mama?

She stood up on her toes and peered in through the narrow window set into the door. There was a faint light toward the back of the house. A single unshaded bulb burning in the little hall between the two bedrooms.

Mama. Let me in now. Do you hear me?

She clutched at the doorknob, pulling and twisting it, and she knocked on the window, rattling the little pane, but the door stayed locked. Then inside the house the dim hall light went out.

Mama. Don't. Please.... Mama. Don't do this.¹

Sometimes the voices say nothing, yet still haunt us. Other times, we are so grateful for their familiar sound. Whatever else our scripture lesson has to say today, it says something significant about voices, and particularly the voice of Jesus. All of John's talk about shepherds and sheep and gates finds a center in Jesus' words about sheep knowing the voice of their shepherd.

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. (10:2-4)

A few verses later, Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. And though some who have lived on farms may object to being characterized as sheep, there is yet no question that we are a people who gather around this good shepherd's voice.²

I don't know how you may have heard it. For some, it may have come in the midst of great stress and anguish as a whisper which said, "Come to me all who carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Others may have heard it while trying to resolve a

¹Kent Haruf, *Plainsong*, 1999, 31-32, as cited by Thomas Are in a paper presented to the January 2003 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Louisville, Kentucky.

²I am grateful to Patrick Willson for this insight and for the suggestion of the direction of this sermon in a paper presented to the Moveable Feast, January 1993, in Malibu, California.

conflict, with angry voices swirling around, but with the sound of another, gentler voice speaking as if only to them, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” We may have been in the middle of a simple act of kindness, when from somewhere we heard, “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you have done it to me.” Who knows? Maybe we were somewhere we shouldn’t have been, acting in some shameful way, when we were brought up short by a voice, saying, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.”

We are a people who gather around the voice of Jesus, brought together by various experiences of His word, or at the least by some hope or expectation of hearing His voice in our lives. Sometimes the voice has brought comfort and peace; at other times it has disturbed our peace. But we have known the voice as one that speaks the truth about us. Patrick Willson rightfully notes that

By no means is this to say we do not hear other voices as well. We hear thieves, who know the price of everything and the value of nothing; bandits, who hold human life cheap and human sentiments cheaper; hirelings, peddling whatever sells, whatever satisfies our latest whims [or fuels our deepest fears]; wolves, who in one way or another feast off us. We hear their voices, no doubt about it. Sometimes so loudly they threaten to drown the Shepherd’s words.

These other voices are loud and convincing.... Sometimes they seduce us, and we don’t realize what is happening until we are far, far from home.³

It was a *New Yorker* cartoon some years ago that depicted two sheep in a flock, with a shepherd standing nearby, with one of the sheep saying to the other, “I’ll tell you why I don’t trust him. It’s that darn sheepskin vest he’s wearing.” Not all would-be shepherds are trustworthy, to be sure.

How are we to tell one from the other? Truth is, there’s no magic formula. The text says only that we will know because we know the shepherd. The only means is familiarity... becoming acquainted with what we know of this Shepherd’s voice, as recorded in the Scriptures, as remembered by the Church, as experienced in the community of faith. There are many people tuned in today who have spent a lifetime listening for that voice, people who can help us along the way, who can aide our hearing and our understanding. But the best word I can give you is Christ’s promise to us that we will know his voice when we hear it... and *he* will know *ours*.

My pastor-friend Tom Are tells of a time years ago when he was a teenager in Atlanta, driving home one autumn day from work at a local shopping mall.

I was driving home on I-285. It was misting, as it had all day long that November [day]. Somehow, and I don’t really know how, a few cars in front of me locked up. There was a lot of swerving, and I ended up being third in a four-car pile-up. No one was hurt, but we were all shaken. Lots of blue lights. I asked a policeman if I

³Willson.

could call my mother. [It was the days before cell phones and] I walked down the embankment to a [gas] station and stood in [a] phone booth and dialed. I said, “Mom.”

It’s funny how a mom can tell. I don’t really know how they can tell. I just said, “Mom”... and she said, “Tell me where you are... I’ll be right there.” [There was] no “what did you do this time? How could this happen. I’ve told you to be more careful.” [There was] none of that, just, “tell me where you are... I’ll be right there.”⁴

Thank God for the times we are shepherded in this life, Tom said. Thank God for the times we know the familiar voice of tender love and care – a voice we know, which knows us in return. Thank God for that. There is much in this world, you know, that seems to scream that we don’t belong, that no one really matters, that turns off the light when we cry out from our dark circumstances of need. Thank God there is a voice...a voice we hear from time to time... a voice weary with suffering. You can hear it sometimes when bread and wine are being served and you catch a glimpse of the cross on the communion table. It is a voice we know, which, with a mother’s tender love, is always steadfast... that says, tell me where you are.... I’ll be right there.⁵

Thieves and hirelings speak glibly of what it is to be human and have all manner of cheap explanations for why we suffer. But Jesus speaks as one who knows the deepest needs and longings of those entrusted to His care. We don’t understand everything he says, but we follow, nonetheless. If *we* don’t understand, at least we sense that *He* understands. Thus, we know something of what His disciples meant when they said, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”⁶ We know his voice. He knows our names... and never forgets.

Lore. Norma. Vania. Maikol.
Yo te puse nombre, mío eres tú.

Ralph. Keisha. Jerry. Esther.
“I have called You by name,” says the Lord, “and you are mine.”
Known. Never forgotten.

Some of you are old enough to remember when the author E.B. White wrote a weekly column in the *New Yorker*. His style and humor and humanity characterized that magazine in its early decades. His biographer, Scott Elledge, remembered one particularly poignant essay, in which White wrote of Hart Island and the hundreds of nameless persons who died every year on the streets of New York. I thought of that essay several times recently as New York City was trying to figure out how to inter the bodies of so many who have died of this horrible virus. In that earlier time E.B. White wrote:

⁴ Tom Are, in the paper cited in note 1.

⁵ Are.

⁶ Willson, op. cit.

New York's pauper dead are buried in a sandy hill on the north end of Hart Island in Long Island Sound. They lie in big graves, tier upon tier, unclaimed [and unnamed]. Twice a week the boat comes up from Bellevue. The [nameless] dead are buried solemnly and without ceremony, 150 to a grave, one white headstone for the whole lot. It is a beautiful spot – the sweep of the Sound, the restless clang of the bell buoy at the point.

The record books [he said] list the entries: a baby found in the parcel room at Penn Station, a man picked up in a Fifth Avenue sewer, page after page, [several] thousand a year. There is a single monument to honor them – bearing the inscription [from the Gospel of John]: “And He shall call His own sheep by name.”⁷

You are named. Loved. Cherished. Shepherded. Always. *Always.*

⁷ E.B. White, as cited in a sermon by K.C. Ptomey, preached April 24, 1994 at the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Nashville.