

Text: John 10:22-30

Happy Mother’s Day and Happy Good Shepherd Sunday! Because of the occasion I feel the need to open with my favorite sheep joke. A man’s car broke down on a country road. While he was peering under the hood to see what was wrong, a sheep trotted up to the nearby fence and looked over at the car. “Probably the ignition gone wrong,” said the sheep. The man, startled, ran off down the road until he bumped into a farmer, and told the farmer what had just happened. “Was it a big sheep with the number E457 on her back?” asked the farmer. “Yes, I think so,” said the man. “Oh, don’t listen to her,” said the farmer. “She doesn’t know anything about cars.”

So, who do we listen to? Who do you listen to? And have you ever noticed how unique each person’s voice is? Truly no two voices are the same. When we hear the voice of a loved one on the phone or from afar, we know instantly who they are and their voice comforts us, calms us, and encourages us when we feel lonely. You’re probably like me and sometimes have the urge to call a loved one and say, “I just needed to hear your voice.”

Voices are important not just for us as humans, but for animals too. I absolutely love the Oscar winning documentary called “March of the Penguins.” One of the most remarkable moments is the scene when all the thousands of young baby penguins, who have been separated from their mothers for a span of several months, must go and find their mothers. I couldn’t help but think about this moving scene as I pondered the significance of Mother’s Day today. These penguin mothers have had to travel a very long distance to get food and nourishment after giving birth to their babies in order to survive and they are finally returning. Amidst an incredible cacophony of sound, with literally thousands of mother penguins and baby penguins all calling out at the same time, we discover that the sound of the mother’s voice is so well imprinted in the baby’s mind that a baby penguin can distinguish his or her mother’s voice from all the others. Thousands of them all calling

for each other – looking for each other. When they are finally reunited, it is a powerful and moving moment, mother and child together again. It’s stunning that penguins have this incredible ability. And in this case, a penguin knowing it’s mother’s voice, is the difference between life and death.

What about us? What voices do we need to hear and listen for?

While I wasn’t in danger of physical death, I did suffer what felt like the threat of a spiritual death when I was in seminary in my 20’s. I had been suffering a severe and protracted faith crisis and felt very lost – unsure about not only God’s presence in my life but confusion and a loss of the sense of my own purpose in life. During a pastoral care and counseling class I was taking, I shared my pain and feelings of loss and confusion with my peer group during a practice-pastoral conversation. My fellow seminarians in training listened to me carefully and compassionately. After the class was over, an older seminarian student, a motherly type, approached me. She said, “I feel as though I need to tell you something.” I looked at her in curiosity. And she said, “Look: It’s clear to me that you know the voice of the Good Shepherd when you hear it. Don’t ever forget that...just trust his voice and you’re going to be okay.” Something sparked for me then – I started paying more attention and I had a bit more confidence – or faith – that Jesus voice was in fact discernable among the many competing voices I had been hearing. That all was not lost – that maybe I had gone astray like a lost sheep but Jesus, the Good Shepherd, wasn’t going to leave me and would come find me so that I could keep following him. And I believe that is exactly what he did.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, our readings focus on Jesus as our Good Shepherd. Jesus says in today’s Gospel from John, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” To follow the Shepherd, we have to know and listen for his voice. Yet we live in a world that is so full of noise and of competing messages and words, of total cacophony of sound. In fact, there are so many voices all speaking to us from so many different

directions, ways and mediums, that it can feel nearly impossible to distinguish between them. What might it mean to be able to hear and recognize Jesus’ voice amidst the others? And how do we begin to discern the voice of the Good Shepherd over that of the wolf or of the thief that comes to destroy and kill, that John describes elsewhere? In this case, it is extremely important that we know the Shepherd’s voice when we hear it because the other voices calling to us may not always be harmless and may even be downright dangerous.

It's not always easy discern the truth, especially in today’s world with social media and so many messages that even intentionally seek to lead us astray, but seeking the truth is a good first step to begin to learn to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. We must ask ourselves some searching questions like: where exactly is this voice taking me? Like the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, does this voice lead me to green pastures and still waters or to scarcity and further confusion? Does this voice revive my soul or weaken and tear it down? Does this voice lead me away from fear and into peace or send me deeper into anxiety? Does this voice lead to a sense of companionship with others and God, or into deeper isolation? Is it a voice of blame and shame or a voice calling me to repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation? Does the voice lead to loving oneself, God, and others more deeply or into enmity and a sense of “otherness”? In essence: are the words life giving? Remember that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has come to heal and give us life more abundantly.

And just as we learn to know the voice of a loved one over time, we must spend time listening to the Good Shepherd’s voice so that we can easily recognize it from the others when it gets noisy. We do this by spending time in prayer, solitude, reading Scripture, worship, being in our faith community, listening to wise and godly people and teachers, and by reading spiritually inspired books...all things that draw us into Christ’s presence regularly. The more time we spend with

the Good Shepherd, the easier it will be to pick out his voice among the others.

And then Jesus promises us that no one can snatch us out of his hand once we follow him. No one and nothing can take us away from the Good Shepherd. We are given eternal and abundant life by God and that is something no one can take away from us. I love to remind people of this when I preach at funerals because it is great comfort to know that we and our loved ones are always safe, in life and death, with the Good Shepherd.

With time and practice and careful listening - we discover that we truly do know the voice of the Good Shepherd when we hear it. And like the baby penguins, it is possible to hear the call and voice of Jesus in the midst of all the other noise and clamor in our lives. The Good Shepherd is always calling to you, even right now. So listen – -----what is the Good Shepherd saying to you?