

In our calendar of scripture readings for the season of Easter, today is Good Shepherd Sunday. There are images of sheep and shepherd in all our readings today and in our hymns as well.

It's comforting to know that we are cared for and protected as a good shepherd cares for his sheep. That may be why the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is such a favorite: "I shall fear no evil for you are with me... I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

And the reading from Acts points out that people like Tabitha are much loved when they practice this kind of caring for others. Tabitha was a shepherd of sorts to those who loved her. As the women weep at her death, they bring out clothes she has made for them and show off her handiwork. To everyone's delight and gratitude, Peter restores her to life.

We have more stories like this one about Tabitha now that we have been using the Revised Common Lectionary, one of the intentions of which was to hold up more of the rich stories of women that fill the Bible. We need these stories because we all know women like this who are models for us.

But the reading from the gospel today is not as comforting as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm or the story of Tabitha. In fact it's rather disturbing.

Jesus says to those in Solomon's portico, "You do not belong to my sheep. That's why you don't hear my voice. You don't belong. You're out. Voted off the island." It sounds exclusive and offensive. Doesn't everyone have the chance to know him, to learn the sound of the shepherd's voice?

But here, as always in the Bible, context is everything. Jesus knows the ones asking the question. He knows they have had every opportunity to hear him and to witness his miracles of healing and his teaching, and yet they are goading him into making blasphemous statements that they can use against him.

These people are "the Jews" throughout the gospel of John. It means they have chosen not to believe or to follow. They are the ones who oppose him and his ministry and who will ultimately bring about his death.

So with great courage Jesus says to them, "The Father and I are one." And he knows the dangerous context into which he says it. These words conjure up the memory of the emperor Antiochus Epiphanes, whose name meant that he considered himself the manifestation of God, and who desecrated the Jewish temple by setting up altars to Zeus over the Jews' sacred altars. In the book of Daniel this was referred to as the Abomination of Desolation.

So here is Jesus, sounding to some of them like this arrogant emperor, claiming to be God in the flesh, and on the Festival of the Dedication, the very celebration of the defeat of Epiphanes by Judas Maccabeus.

Could these sheep tell the voice of this good shepherd from the voice of the emperor whose goal it was to destroy them?

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” I’m told that sheep, who are not the smartest animals alive, are able to tell the voice of their shepherd from others. Many shepherds may combine their flocks at night and the sheep will get all mixed up and lie down together. But when morning comes and one shepherd is ready to leave he will call his flock and the sheep know his voice and follow him, while the others stay and wait for the voice they know.

But I wonder - How do we know the right voice to follow?

This is a question we ought to be asking in our society right now. How do we know the voice that speaks the truth and is worthy of our following? Opposing viewpoints are healthy in a democratic society, but how do we tell which speaker has our best interests at heart? How do we decide where to tune our radio or TV or which magazines and newspapers to read? Whose statements stand up to the truth test and which ones are trying to manipulate us – for our vote, or our contribution. Whose aim is simply to make money?

Living wisely in the world today takes work. It takes staying informed and weighing carefully what is said and who said it. It takes thinking critically, perhaps more than at any time in history.

The fields are full of the kind of shepherds who would either sell off the sheep or head for the hills at the first sign of trouble. How do we tell which one to follow?

I remember rather clearly a 5<sup>th</sup> grade assignment for Mrs. Hernblad’s class at the Center School in Foxboro some years ago. It was to watch the news on TV (which was pretty new at that time) and to determine whether the newscaster was reporting simply the facts or whether he (yes, he) was expressing his own opinion in any way.

It was a hard assignment for me. I was accepting then, I think everyone was in the 1950s, and I trusted that what I heard from someone as respected as a newsman would naturally be the truth. That was then. And how different the news is now.

Neil Postman wrote in a little book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, that because we were so attracted to entertainment everything would change - and he was certainly right.

You will have to decide for yourselves what newscasters and civic leaders have your best interests at heart and whose voice you should listen to. I don’t intend to tell you that – at least not from the pulpit.

But I do have something to say about hearing the voice of the shepherd in the life of your spirit. And I believe that very often translates into our earthly choices as well.

The way to know the voice of the shepherd and the way to hear it more and more often, is by practice. Diligent practice. By becoming more and more an observant Christian.

By observant I mean observing Sunday as a day of worship, making a habit of prayer, living through the cycle of the church year, finding ways to learn more about the shepherd – through reading and discussing scripture and other writings, practicing the discipline of giving – giving your treasure and your talents and your energy – serving others.

That's the life of an observant Christian. Living it provides opportunities, over time, to test the truth of the faith for your own life.

Being part of a church community is not the only way to be an observant Christian, of course, but it's the easiest way, because the community is already there, the worship and learning opportunities too, the fellowship and the service.

What we do here every week is to become more familiar with the voice of the shepherd, who is also the lamb who was sacrificed for us. We enter that mystery together in order that we might come closer to God.

Perhaps this brief story about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm expresses what I mean.

There was a great gathering of people somewhere in a great city. To the stage came an accomplished actor, well known to all the people, an attractive man with a fine speaking voice. He told the audience that he would like to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. A hush fell over the crowd and the actor began speaking in his rich, warm baritone voice. His inflections were flawless and his reading was so beautiful that the audience burst into applause when he was finished.

Then another man was introduced. He had been a missionary in Africa, the audience was told.

He was old, and it took him a long time to hobble up the steps to the stage. He, too, announced that he would say the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The people had to strain to hear his voice because it was raspy and weak. When this man finished there was no applause, rather, everyone in the room was weeping.

The actor later explained why he thought all this had happened. "Well," he said, "It's because I know the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm very well, but this man knows the shepherd."

May God lead us to know him every more closely, to hear and trust his voice, and to follow where he leads.

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria