

Listening to the Shepherd

John 10:1–21

This week is Epiphany Sunday, or Three Kings' Day. It is the day in the Christian calendar where we remember the dedication of the wise men who travelled from faraway lands to worship a king whom they only knew about because of the stars. They arrived in Jerusalem, asking King Herod, "Where is the new king?" Herod, understandably disturbed because a new royal prince had not been born in Jerusalem, consulted the priests and scholars, who cited to him Micah 5:4: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

In our passage today, Jesus names himself as the good shepherd. The sheep follow their shepherd because they know his voice. When the wind blows and the rains fall, when thieves, robbers, and wolves come, the sheep know their shepherd's voice and follow him. "But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."¹ They know their shepherd above all.

I was born with a hearing loss. It's been there all my life; without the use of hearing aids, I would never know just how many birds sing almost-constantly in the springtime, or the distinct rustle of leaves in the trees, or the whisper of rubbing one's hands together, or the whisper of just about anything, actually. I used to joke with my high school friends during sleepovers that they needed to leave the lights on so that I could hear them.

I lived without hearing aids for the first seventeen years of my life, and I can't begin to tell you how difficult it was to be in any social gathering where the distinction of voices were lost in the crowd or how often I misunderstood what others were saying and responded entirely the wrong way... something I found out quickly when they gave me a strange look, or how many times I was considered rude because I didn't hear someone speak to me and apparently ignored them.

But the voices that I would hear above any crowd or ambient noise are those of my parents. You could say that my parents learned to speak clearly and at an appropriate volume for the hearing impaired—both my older sister and I have hearing impairments—and adjusted accordingly. But I think the voices of my parents were instilled so deeply within me that I would hear them at the pool, in the mall, or across their acreage. Not perfectly, mind you, but even now with the help of hearing aids, the voices of my parents take the least amount of effort for me to hear at any given time.

¹ John 10:5, NIV

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I know their voices. I know the pitch, the tone, the range, and I know what each tone means because I learned it intimately. Their voices were safe havens for me in a world where I missed out on much because I couldn't hear it.

Even if you aren't hearing impaired, there are voices that you know better than anything, voices that you could pick out across a busy room, because you are attuned to them. You *know* them. Some voices are safe havens for us; others are dangerous, causing red flags to pop up when we hear them, usually because they are associated with pain or trauma. We naturally gravitate to the voices that feel safe to us, and we avoid those that we associate with harm.

Which voices do you know best? Most likely, they are the voices that you have heard most often, perhaps even from childhood. They are the voices that have been present in your life through thick and thin.

Jesus uses imagery that his Jewish listeners would have been well familiar with. Two of their great leaders, Moses and David, had been shepherds. Before they led people, they led sheep. When the people of Israel are carted off into captivity, the prophets declare that it is because their shepherds, that is, their leaders, did not do their job in taking care of the people. In Ezekiel 34, we read,

“Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! . . . This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. . . I will shepherd the flock with justice.”²

Jesus declares himself as the good shepherd. He is the one who gently, tenderly cares for his sheep; he describes the Pharisees as thieves, robbers, and hired hands who do not care for the flock. Harsh words. The Pharisees don't quite understand what he's getting at at first; surely, he could not be pointing fingers at them for holding to the Sabbath laws, for condemning the blind man's healing.

Jesus is sneaky; this is exactly what he is doing. The blind man, who'd just been healed, is a sheep looking for spiritual leadership, and the Pharisees respond to his need by throwing him out of the synagogue. They could not see past their skewed interpretation of Scripture to see the miracle of a blind man receiving sight; Jesus broke the rules; he cannot be from God. The blind man, by contrast, proclaims, “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”³

² Ezek 34: 2, 11, 16, NIV

³ John 9:33, NIV

The Pharisees are poor shepherds, and Jesus calls them out for it. They are popular, theologically trained teachers who wish to keep the gate of salvation and deliverance closed against even a hint of flourishing life so that they may enforce law and order. Jesus, though, says, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved (that is, delivered, rescued and healed). They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”⁴ Jesus throws the gate wide open, even welcoming sheep that are *not* of this sheep pen, that is, the outsiders and foreigners, the non-Jews, with one stipulation—*he is the gate*.

He is the good shepherd who leads his flock and the gate that leads to life. In him, there is rest. Pasture. Green fields of rest and sunshine. There is protection from those thieves who would steal, kill, and destroy the people with false words and enticing promises that joy and love can be found in other things, even so-called religious things.

Which voices—which shepherds and leaders—do we follow? Now I’m not talking about physical voices, but spiritual, political, emotional, mentoring voices. Our world is full of voices, more than ever before, I think. The world of YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram has ensured that we are never without voices to listen to: popular church leaders, influencers, celebrities, politicians; we listen to these voices, and over time, they become familiar to us. We begin to say what they say, use the words that they use, project their opinions until they become ours, just like the Jewish people had done with their Pharisees. Well-intended as they were, they had lost sight of the reason for their faith, and so they became thieves and robbers of the peoples’ joy.

There are many, many voices. Many will tell you that you need to do X, Y, or Z to be most faithful to Jesus. You need to follow this political party, go to that rally, stand up for this belief against all opposition, and plant flags and signs on your yard so that everyone knows exactly where you stand. Many will attach their words to a specific flavour of Christianity, stating that *this* is what true Christianity looks like, not *that*. There is a lot of noise. Well-intended, but they are robbers of our attention, shifting our gaze to a political ideology or controversy instead of to Jesus.

Franciscan monk Richard Rohr says, “Truth is always for the sake of love—and not an absolute end in itself, which too often becomes the worship of an ideology.”⁵ That is exactly what had happened to the Pharisees—truth became the end itself. Rules were a way of enforcing what they saw to be the doctrinal truth about God, and it became a worship of

⁴ John 10:9–10, NIV

⁵ Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 106.

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something other than God. It became idolatry. This is what happened to the medieval Catholic church, and it is happening today in evangelical North America.

Truth *must always* be for the sake of love.

“I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says. “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”⁶ Five times Jesus says that he lays down his life for his sheep—willingly and authoritatively. Theologians call this *kenosis*, which is a Greek word that means “to empty.” Jesus emptied himself completely so that we could know him completely. He gave his life, not only in death but repeatedly in his life as he gave his healing power to the sick, blind, deaf, and crippled, as he fed the hungry, as he taught his disciples what it meant to walk with him without a place to lay his head at night. He was worshipped completely by lowly shepherds and wealthy foreign wise men alike.

Imitating this self-giving love of this shepherd matters far more than obeying the rules or believing the right doctrine. It matters far more than which political ideology you profess, which church you belong to, or where you worship. “Follow me,” Jesus said. “Do as I do.”

Truth *must always* be for the sake of love.

This is what differentiates the thieves and robbers from the good shepherd. The thieves and robbers try to enter by another way, not realizing that truth cannot be achieved without love. The sheep are not swayed. They know their shepherd’s voice, and they follow him alone. They ignore imposters, recognizing their demanding voices as *untruth* because it is *unlove*. These would steal, kill, and destroy without second thought for their personal gain. The good shepherd *lays down his life* for his flock, gaining nothing.

I don’t know about you, but this makes me want to follow the good shepherd. This makes me want to follow Jesus with all my heart and soul, forsaking all other voices because they simply can’t compare with the life found in following Jesus.

So then, how can we, his sheep, know his voice? How can we know what the voice of our shepherd sounds like when we are inundated with so much noise?

Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”⁷

Silence. Solitude. Stillness.

⁶ John 10:11, NIV

⁷ Matt 6:6, NIV

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That's how we learn to hear the voice of God. The desert mothers and fathers in the early centuries of the church removed themselves from society entirely, choosing to live in the wilderness as the children of Israel did. They lived in caves, alone with only God as their company. And they heard the voice of God. Monks have, for centuries, practiced silence and solitude. This has a long tradition in the faithful Christians who have lived before us.

Now, I'm not advocating that we all become hermits or retreat to monasteries to live separately from everyone else. Removing ourselves from the world entirely is not the answer. However, I am saying that *we need time with God alone* if we are to learn the sound of his voice.

Stillness is resistance—resistance to the clamour of technology, social media, news, war, famine, and everything else that is wrong with our world. Silence strips away all the things that distract us and leave us bare before God. It is naked. It is vulnerable. The temptation to pull on *anything* that will protect us or hide us is strong—to turn on the music, talk to someone, watch TV, play a game, do more work, spend more money, or deep dive into political controversy.

Stillness. Silence. Solitude.

Time alone with God.

It is the only way that you will learn to hear God's voice for yourself. If you only depend on others to tell you what God sounds like, or *what he should sound like*, you'll only end up learning their interpretation of what God sounds like. You need to meet God yourself, and to do so takes learning how to listen to and hear his voice.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't talk to those who have spent time with God. Talking to those who are older and wiser in the faith is tremendously helpful in learning how to discern the voice of God. But the only way to learn what God sounds like is to *practice it yourself*. Silence, stillness, and solitude are very difficult to do. We get antsy and restless as soon as there is no stimulation or noise. Or perhaps the noise of our own minds drowns out any hope of stillness.

I want to invite you to try something this week. For five minutes once a day, try sitting in stillness and silence. Set a timer so that you do not feel the need to look at the time every ten seconds. Turn off your phone notifications so that you are not distracted. It can be helpful to turn a portion of Scripture in your mind as an anchoring point, something like this verse, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." Spend time with these words, not analyzing them, but resting in them. Let these words draw you back into stillness with Jesus when your mind starts to drift.

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Try it for a week. It's not a New Year's resolution; it's trying something new so that you might leave behind the things that drown out the voice of God. Try it. Like trying anything new, it's hard to start. You'll be distracted. You'll want to pick up your phone or flip through the news. You'll want to talk to someone. If you're someone who can't sit still, try it anyway. Do it for a week, and then maybe for another, and another. Jesus himself frequently went to the quiet places to pray, away from the hustle and bustle. If we are his disciples, we ought to imitate his habits, don't you think?

Go into your room, close the door, and pray. Sitting in stillness with your eyes turned to God is prayer. You don't need to talk to God. Just meditate on who he is. Meditate on the truth of who he is in Scripture. Orient yourself to him. Breathe. Still the noise and listen. One day, you might be surprised to hear the silence speak back.

Now, this is not the only way to hear the voice of God. It is only *one* way to help reset your heart, soul, and mind to remove yourself from the noise of your life. *The point is that you are removing other voices so that you can hear God more clearly.* It's not about the rule; it's about laying down your very life just as Jesus did so that you may know life more fully. It's about love—loving God more than anything else, loving others by stopping long enough to hear what matters, and loving yourself enough to hear what resonates deep in your soul. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbors as yourself.”

As we spend time with Jesus in the silence, we begin to hear his voice. We begin to *know* his voice. And we follow. We do not stay there, in the silence; we return to it frequently so that we still know his voice above all others, and then we move back out into the world, a little surer of who we are as individuals and as a church, and who our God is. We find our capacity to love grows a little larger as we listen to our shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep.