

Sermon notes - May 3, 2020 - 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

“The Good Shepherd”

In my role as a Church Pastor I am from time to time asked to speak with couples who are planning on getting married. In the course of these conversations, when it comes to service planning, I will often be told a story about ‘their song’ - that one piece of music that was the background for a significant event. Whenever they hear this piece of music they are transported in some way to that special moment in their lives. Music has a way of making connections that no other form seems to have. I have known people suffering from Alzheimer’s disease to sing along, word for word, even though they can’t remember their loved one’s name. Such a song is a very important element to a couple’s life.

Other sounds are also very important. We are trained from an early age to recognize noises that announce an emergency and, who among us, cannot pick our parents voice out of a crowd. These sounds become an intimate part of our existence and a sort of ‘short hand’ in getting our attention. In a similar way a flock of sheep will have a particular ‘song’ to which it is attuned. This fact is demonstrated when more than one flock of sheep is held in a pen and a particular shepherd comes to the gate and begins to sing or play ‘their song’. People who have witnessed this event in person describe it with amazement as the identical looking sheep begin to separate themselves from each other. As the shepherd walks away from the enclosure the sheep that are attuned to his particular song begin to follow. This is the picture Jesus is using when he says, “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...the sheep follow him because they know his voice” David, the shepherd, knew of this fact as well when he wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd”. The particular voice of the shepherd is recognized and followed even in the midst of competing voices. “I am the good shepherd”, Jesus declared later in this speech in order to make it clear the kind of connection he was to have with those who follow him. It was a connection produced by a particular ‘song’.

Jesus also referred to himself as the gate. Shepherds would often corral their sheep over night and then lie down in the gate of the pen in order to know if strays were trying to leave and to be the defender of the sheep against predators. Of course an evil person could try to mimic the song of the shepherd in order to steal the sheep but the good shepherd would defend and protect his flock. We are Jesus’ sheep if we have accepted his leadership. He teaches us, through the Holy Spirit, his song. This song educates our built in conscience in order to help it and us walk along a better path. Jesus also lies across the gateway to the outside world in order to provide a barrier of safety.

The imagery of sheep has often been used in scripture to describe God’s people and the attributes

of sheep that are commended are obedience and dependance. The attributes that are criticized include willfulness and foolishness. Those who care for sheep know that, while a very useful animal, they are not known for high intelligence. They are bred to follow and so they do without much discrimination of who is leading or where they are being led. A wise sheep would only listen to its shepherd but just as in human societies there are only a few wise sheep. The comparison is not flattering to us humans but it is uncomfortably accurate at times. Who has not heard a parent say something like, “If Billy jumped off a roof would you do it too?” The answer is sadly very often ‘yes’. Just because someone else is doing something we often feel compelled to follow their example without much thought. “They are stocking up on toilet paper I guess I better do the same” But if, as Jesus says, we sheep know the shepherds voice does it not make sense to allow ourselves to be trained to follow the shepherd alone? Before he was crucified Jesus promised, “when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth;” (John 16:13) This promise, I suggest, is the way in which we are to learn the song of the shepherd. By asking God to send the Holy Spirit to the believers Jesus was ensuring a method through which the sheep would know his voice. We, who are his disciples, are in need of guidance and protection and so it would serve us well to learn how to attend to the voice of God - the voice of the Good Shepherd.

One of the ways of doing this is by reading scripture on a regular basis. Through this form of communication we begin to recognize the true voice of God and so are able to better discern the false voices of the enemies of God. When someone tells us something false about a loved one are we not able to better detect the lie than if someone tells us something false about a stranger? In the same way if we are spending time in scripture and getting to know our Father in heaven it will be more difficult for people to convince us of something that isn't true about God. Prayerful reading, asking the Holy Spirit to guide our understanding, is helped by good habits. This is one of the reasons why I recommend daily reading aids like the Forward Day by Day booklets. As we develop the habit of daily reading and listening to the voice of God we become better sheep. During this time of self-isolation we may find our lives upset to a great degree and so daily habits like Bible reading may have been set aside. I urge you, as fellow members of the flock, to renew your habits if they have fallen aside and pray for God's guidance. The Shepherd's song will once again become loud and clear in your hearts.

We are asked to consider viewing Jesus in the role of a Shepherd, a guardian for our souls. As we meditate on this familiar picture of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob may we be reminded of the beautiful 'song' which captured our hearts when we became members of this flock. May God bless us in these days of separation with the song of the ages filling our hearts.