

“Following the Shepherd’s Voice”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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John 10: 1-10

Have you ever played “Marco Polo?” It’s one of those games you play when you’re at the pool in the summer, especially as children. One person keeps his or her eyes closed, and when that person says, “Marco,” everyone else replies, “Polo.” Based on the sound of others’ voices, the person with his or her eyes closed moves to try and tag the others. It’s a lot of fun, unless you are the one with your eyes closed and people cheat and don’t reply back to your repeated calls!

At Pyoca, we’ve done a similar exercise the last couple of years at the Confirmation Retreat. You may have seen a couple of pictures in the collage earlier with Lisa and others wearing blindfolds. The exercise begins with people in pairs: one partner wears a blindfold, while the other does not. The one with a blindfold begins holding onto a string, and that is connected to many different strings in a maze. The goal is to finish the maze at one ending spot, and there is one path that gets everyone to that finish. The trick is that the person blindfolded cannot take the blindfold off, and is dependent on his or her partner to tell him or her what to do.

I have participated in all three aspects of this exercise: being blind, being the guide, and observing others walking through the maze. When I have been blindfolded, it can be very disorienting to be totally dependent on someone else to guide you, unsure as to if you will trip or stumble or end up in the right place! When I have been the guide, it can be very stressful to realize that someone else’s fortune is completely dependent on you and your ability to offer clear, understandable directions for finding their path. When I have observed others in the maze, it can be fascinating to witness some people move through the process with ease, and others struggle mightily with the task at hand.

Of course, for those of us who are sighted, it is a temporary experience of what life is like for those who are blind or struggle with sight. It provides a small yet effective means of letting us walk in their shoes, and understanding better how it is very challenging to rely both on others and on yourself in different ways. Most certainly, though, as an exercise, it stresses the importance of listening and trusting another’s voice, so that you can safely walk the journey that is before you.

I specifically thought of this experience when I read this morning’s scripture. “The gatekeeper opens the gate for (the shepherd), and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them

out” (10:3). The image of Jesus as the good shepherd is one we are all very familiar with, and it is a primary image used throughout the Gospel of John. In this short passage, we also hear Jesus affirm his identity as “the gate” for the sheep, implying he is both the one who shepherds and the way through which the sheep are guided. How do these images fit with our understanding of Jesus’ identity in our personal lives of faith today? And how do we seek to listen to the voice of the shepherd, amid so many other competing, distracting voices in our daily walk of faith?

Throughout Israel’s history, there has been this faith and trust in God to be a shepherd of his people. There was David, the shepherd who became a king, and there was faith in the promised Messiah, who, as the prophet Isaiah foretold, “would gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (Isaiah 40:11). We hear over and over again in the Old Testament the theme that God will provide for and protect God’s own chosen people, much like a shepherd providing for and protecting his sheep.

When Jesus uses this imagery, then, the disciples and the crowds would have made a natural connection to their collective past. “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” (10:3-4).

The sheep trust the voice of the one who is their shepherd. They follow wherever that voice calls out to them. The sheep respond to the one who cares for, protects, and provides for their every need. Their act of thanksgiving is to follow the shepherd’s voice.

Later in this chapter of John, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep” (10:14-16). He uses language that is clear and familiar: a shepherd who cares for his sheep. And in so doing, he reminds them that he would do anything for his flock – including giving up his life – so that they might live.

Jesus has taken ownership in his relationship to us by claiming us as his very own. We are not being watched after by someone who is looking to make a quick buck, a hired hand who has no personal investment in the safety of the herd. We are cared for by an individual who takes on our problems as his problems. We are protected by someone who views any threat to us as a threat to himself. We are nurtured back to health by a person who will never leave us when we are weak or struggling or failing. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me.”

But Jesus is more than just the one who leads us along the right path – he is also the path on which we travel. Jesus says, “I am the gate

for the sheep . . . Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture . . . I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:7-10). It is in his sending by God that Jesus shows us he is the path to eternal life, while at the same time leading us along that path. “While these are closely related, they are not the same thing. Jesus is the way to life because he is himself life. Jesus leads the way to life because he lays down his own life. These are non-transferable attributes; they derive from the heart of Jesus’ identity as the one sent by God” (New Interpreters Bible, 672).

Jesus’ identity is like a shepherd who guides his sheep, while Jesus’ purpose is like the gate through which the sheep enter. His identity as the Son of God is inseparable from his purpose as the Son of God. He is the one that calls each of his sheep by name, and they know him undeniably through his voice. He is the one who is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and it is only through him that we come to know God the Father (John 14). Jesus not only calls us by name into a life of service, he also is the way – the gate – through which we come to know God in a more complete and transformative way.

As we consider how this passage relates to us in our daily walk today, I’m struck by the image of the sheep knowing the shepherd’s voice. Each day, we are overwhelmed by a cacophony of voices, from the moment the alarm clock going off to the moment our head hits the pillow at night. The voices of the television or radio yell at us, announcing the latest, breaking news or imploring us to purchase an item we simply cannot live without. The voices of our families or co-workers can seem to be a monotonous drone of wants, complaints, worries, or small-talk. The voice of internal self-doubt creeps in whenever we face roadblocks or challenges in our vocation, our family life, or our faith. There are a plethora of voices we must sift through each and every day. It can be incredibly disorienting to know which voices to pay attention to, and which voices to tune out. How can we know the difference? How do we listen for the shepherd’s voice?

I believe the key lies in the last verse of this passage. Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10). There are many voices whose sole purpose is to steal life away. They do not enter through the gate but “jump the fence” to get to the sheep. Those are the voices of selfishness, of exclusion, of building walls to separate, of bitterness, of pride, of intransigence. The sole purpose of those voices is to steal life away.

The sole purpose of the voice of the good shepherd is “that all may have life and have it abundantly.” Jesus was sent by God to give life, to transform life, to create abundant life. He is not the thief who steals. He is the one who gives; who thinks first of the other before he thinks of himself; who does not yield to the temptation of hatred or

bitterness. Jesus is the gateway through whom we are promised an abundant life.

What does an abundant life look like to you? Does it include a sense of purpose and meaning to what you are doing, even when some days are a challenge? Does it include a sense of love and appreciation for the people closest to you, even when some days you don't always get along? Does it include a sense that God is present – truly present – in your daily walk of faith, even when some days are trying and testing?

If you are struggling to believe that you have an abundant life, then perhaps it is time to listen to some new voices. Perhaps it is time to tune out the voices that lead to stealing away life, and to tune in to the voices that provide an abundant life. If your faith is rooted in the voice of perpetual anger, frustration, or bitterness – then, my friend, that is not the voice of the good shepherd. The voice of the good shepherd is the one that is calling all his children to lives of abundant service, abundant joy, and abundant life.

“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.