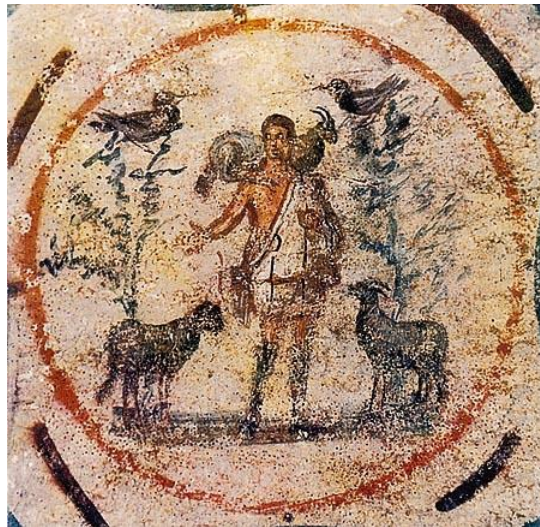




SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR B APRIL 25, 2021,
ACTS 4:5-12; PSALM 23; 1 JOHN 3:16-24; JOHN 10:11-18

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE



John 10:11-18 [*Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 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. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”]*

You may have seen the social media meme making the rounds this past week in which a pudgy little lamb had fallen into a narrow trench headfirst. A man is seen pulling his

hind leg to free him, only to watch the poor lamb scramble a few steps in flight and then, somehow manages to fall into the trench again just twenty feet down the line.

Sheep have a reputation for a certain lack of intelligence, but a little sleuth work this week yielded an interesting origin for that ugly rumor. It turns out that sheep are actually pretty smart; the reputation for dumbness was promulgated by cattle ranchers because sheep do not behave as cows do. Cows are herded from behind by ranch hands hooting and hollering and cracking whips. Sheep respond to such commotion at their rear by circling out and back, trying to get behind the person. But stand in front of them and call them forward, and sheep will follow you wherever you go.ⁱⁱ

You push cows; you lead sheep. A good shepherd knows this, and can tend to a herd of several hundred sheep solo just by a distinctive call, leading them to green pastures or beside still waters.

If you've been to the Holy Land, you will likely have seen, even today, a shepherd walking with staff in hand, or loping along on donkey, moving across the broad valley unrestrained by barbed wire fencing, with a large flock following. It's been this way for centuries, which is why there is so much imagery of sheep in the scriptures. And today, on this fourth Sunday of Easter, commonly known as Good Shepherd Sunday, we are invited once more to consider

what the sheep and the shepherd have to say to us.

One more detail to share about shepherding. When night falls, and the threat of predators awakens for the hunt, shepherds consolidate their flocks into sheepfolds, leading them through a opening in a rock wall that corrals the sheep. On the top of the wall they place thistles and thorns, to prevent the sheep from climbing out, and to prevent the predators from climbing in. And one shepherd sleeps at the opening, known as the sheep gate.

When morning arrives, each shepherd returns, and with distinctive chirps and whistles, calls their particular sheep one by one back through the gate and into the open pasture. Each sheep knows their shepherd's unique call, and follows. It's really quite remarkable.

When Jesus says "I am the good shepherd," he's speaking a gentle truth into a fierce conversation with the religious leaders who have just chastised him for healing a blind man on the sabbath. In John's gospel, when Jesus makes "I am" statements, he is claiming divine authority, hearkening back to the name attributed to Yahweh in Exodus—I AM WHO I AM.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the verses preceding the passage we just heard read, he makes statements to them like:

Very truly, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. And

Very truly, I am the gate for the sheep...they know my voice. I AM...

The invitation is for us to hear his voice as one with God's voice, speaking truth to us as beloved, as known, as claimed by God.

I've been working lately with the Daily Examen of Ignatian Spirituality. Simply put, the invitation is to practice prayerful reflection on one's day, seeking to discover God's presence, practice gratitude, and be aware of one's emotions—not feelings, but the energy we give to the voices we hear, and whether they arise from the true self or false self. Another way of saying that is discerning whether my emotions arise from the voice of God residing deep within my spirit. And am I able to hear that voice, and know it as the source of goodness within me.

Often though, there are a lot of other voices in the mix, working to convince me otherwise.

Henri Nouwen once said there are three lies to human identity that fool us into false-self emotions. These three lies are:

1. I am what I do.
2. I am what I have.

3. I am what other people think.^{iv}

I suspect we all fall prey to those lies at points on the journey. Lord knows our culture pressures us into believing them, and before we know it our spirits are falling into trenches and traps of considerable danger, getting stuck and in need of a shepherd's caring voice and gentle hand.

St. Ignatius mined the spiritual exercises in order to differentiate what he called the good spirit and bad spirit moving within each of us. Some call this the inherent capacity all humans have for good and evil, but whatever terms you choose to use, the point is we all have the propensity to both, heeding the voices within and without that nurture or stifle. The spiritual journey is about discerning the difference, and following the voice of the true shepherd speaking your goodness into life.

If you sense God's voice leading you, often you may find another voice pushing you, or rushing you, or pressuring you. The spiritual exercise is to be aware of both voices, to be aware of good and evil in the world, but the task is to be aware of what you internalize. Be aware of which voice is speaking in you to you.

If God's voice is encouraging you, be aware of the voice that discourages you.

If God's voice is reassuring you, be aware of the voice the frightens you or puts you down.

If God's voice calms you, be aware of the voice that obsesses in you.

If God's voice convicts you when you make a wrong turn in life (guilt), be aware of the voice that condemns you instead (shame).

And finally, if God's voice enlightens you, be aware of the voice that confuses you.

In summary, let God's voice lead you, and be aware of the voice pushing you.

That may sound easy, but it's really quite difficult, with all the voices bombarding your spirit at any given moment. That's why the Daily Examen can be so effective—the rhythmic practice of reflection, orienting to God's presence, practicing gratitude, and being mindful of the emotional energy you bring to it all.

The imprint of relationship with God is seeded in your soul, in your very being. Your being—that is, the verb that gives life to you and me and all creation. The great I AM.

Listen to that voice!

ⁱ The Good Shepherd. The Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome, dating from 3rdC.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Shepherd#/media/File:Good_shepherd_01_small.jpg

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, 1993, 146-147.

ⁱⁱⁱ The seven I AM statements of Jesus in John's gospel are:
1. "I am the bread of life." ([John 6:35, 41, 48, 51](#))

2. "I am the light of the world." ([John 8:12](#))

3. "I am the door of the sheep." ([John 10:7,9](#))

4. "I am the resurrection and the life." ([John 11:25](#))

5. "I am the good shepherd." ([John 10:11, 14](#))

6. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." ([John 14:6](#))

7. "I am the true vine." ([John 15:1, 5](#))

^{iv} The three lies are attributed to various authors, but Henri Nouwen is most often named.