

A Familiar Voice

Texts: Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – May 3, 2020

Rev. Michael F. Atzert

I really love all three of the Scriptures from the lectionary this morning. The Acts passage, which we read to prepare ourselves for worship, is the epitome of what a community of faith should be – devoting ourselves to a life in faith, fellowshiping and breaking bread, giving to anyone who has need, praising God together and sharing life together. And the Lord blessed the Acts church tremendously. And the first Scripture reading, which Lori read, from Psalm 23. When I officiate at funerals, I always read this Psalm in the King James version. That is the way I hear it in my head, from my childhood. I included the New International Version today because I wanted all of us to hear it differently – to draw us out of auto-pilot and concentrate on the words more and the comfort we can take from them in these times.

Then, we have this beautiful passage from the Gospel of John regarding the relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep. The familiarity, the intimacy, the comfort that the Shepherd brings to the flock. It is that familiarity, that comfort that I want to talk about this morning. We need that today – we need it to provide us with hope, strength, and the will to move forward, especially with things – hopefully and prayerfully – starting to get better a bit. We need the hope that our Shepherd, our Savior Jesus Christ brings to us and we can share with others.

“When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” There is enough trust and faith between sheep and Shepherd because they know his voice – it is familiar to them. And because of that, they can follow confidently because they know the Shepherd would never steer the sheep wrongly. Who is that familiar voice for you? Perhaps it is your mom, or your dad, your spouse, your son or daughter,

your grandparent or grandchildren? It is that voice that as soon as you hear it, it gives you comfort, peace, and assurance. The voice that you have come to trust – the voice that signifies a safe place, a place of retreat, a voice that you can follow.

That is the voice of Jesus. It is familiar. It is a voice we can trust. We hear Jesus' voice through others – when they encourage us, when they challenge us, when they provide us with an answer about which we have been praying. Jesus' voice can also be silent, but it speaks volumes. Those times when we are anxious or afraid, and that unexplainable peace and warmth comes over us. We cannot explain it. It is Jesus' voice and His presence helping us in our time of need. How can you put yourself in a better position during these times to listen for that familiar voice of Jesus? Where do you see Him leading you?

And it is not just the Shepherd's voice that is familiar. Everything about the Shepherd is so. And the Shepherd knows His sheep personally. "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." A relationship has developed and grown between the Shepherd and sheep so that it is not just His voice that is familiar. Everything about Him is – and the Shepherd has taken the time to get to know the sheep. He understands their personality, their quirks and idiosyncrasies, their passions and hot buttons, what will challenge them and cause them to grow.

Christian author Max Lucado writes this in his book When God Whispers Your Name: "When I see a flock of sheep I see exactly that, a flock. A rabble of wool. A herd of hooves. I don't *see* a sheep. I see sheep. All alike. None different. That's what I see.

But not so with the shepherd. To him every sheep is different. Every face is special. Every face has a story. And every sheep has a name. *The one with the sad eyes, that's Droopy.*

*And the fellow with one ear up and the other down, I call him Oscar. And the small one with the black patch on his leg, he's an orphan with no brothers. I call him Joseph.*

The shepherd knows his sheep. He calls them by name. When we see a crowd, we see exactly that, a crowd. Filling a stadium or flooding a mall. When we see a crowd, we see people, not persons, but people. A herd of humans. A flock of faces. That's what we see.

But not so with the Shepherd. To him every face is different. Every face is a story. Every face is a child. Every child has a name. *The one with the sad eyes, that's Sally. The old fellow with one eyebrow up and the other down, Harry's his name. And the young one with the limp? He's an orphan with no brothers. I call him Joey.*

The Shepherd knows his sheep. He knows each one by name. The Shepherd knows you. He knows your name. And he will never forget it. *I have written your name on my hand* (Isaiah 49:16). Quite a thought, isn't it? Your name on God's hands. Your name on God's lips. Maybe you've seen your name in some special places. On an award or diploma or walnut door. Or maybe you've heard your name from some important people – a coach, a celebrity, a teacher. But to think that your name is on God's hand and God's lips – my, could it be?

Or perhaps you've never seen your name honored. And you can't remember when you heard it spoken with kindness. If so, it may be more difficult for you to believe that God knows your name. But he does. Written on his hand. Spoken by his mouth. Whispered by his lips. Your name. And not only the name you now have, but the name he has in store for you" (Max Lucado. When God Whispers Your Name. Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999. pp. 1-2).

The Shepherd's voice is familiar. He knows your name. The Shepherd knows you – and cares about you. And so, now what? Look at verse 10. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." The Shepherd cares about you and wants you to have an abundant life –

a life full of hope and promise and fulfillment. He came that we might experience a life like no other – both in this world and throughout eternity.

Maybe, for you, that is difficult to grasp right now. After six or seven weeks, your patience is wearing thin. You want things to return to normal – or at least to some representation of what life was like before mid-March. The social distancing, putting on a mask, and anxiety that you are feeling does not seem like it is life to the full for you. Absolutely – I get it. I think it is pretty safe to say that we have all experienced times of deep sorrow and dread over the last few months.

However, I also think this downtime has given each of us the opportunity to think and reflect on what is truly important in our lives. On the other side of this, I have heard many people say that their lives will be different – that their priorities will be changed and transformed. That we will appreciate the little things in life a little more. That time with family and friends and our church family in person will take on new meaning. For many of us, that will contribute to Jesus' promise to give us life to the full. For time with our loved ones out of isolation is more than fulfillment – it is hope and love and joy!

Listen to what Jesus' familiar voice is speaking to you during these times. Get to know Him more, as you are more fully known by Him. And pray about what that life to the full looks like for you, knowing that Jesus will lead you, open gates for you, and bless you. Let us pray...

O Lord, our Shepherd, we thank You that Yours is a familiar voice which we can trust and follow. We thank You, also, that You know us fully and deeply. Help us, we pray, to accept Your call to new life – to life at its fullest. Show us what that means for our individual lives and how it can lead to selfless lives of service. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.