

St. Paul's, Concord  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
John 10: 11-18, Psalm 23  
The Rev. Drew Courtright, Curate

The concept of God as shepherd can be found throughout the Bible. From the psalms, to the prophets, and finally in the gospel--God is named as a shepherd and the people of God as God's flock. It's a comforting image--that of a watchful and caring shepherd who looks after the sheep. It's also very realistic, as sheep often go their own way and get into all sorts of messy situations, times when they need the shepherd's help.

Today I'd like to take deeper look at the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd by using the wonderful Collect of the Day, specifically the three parts of this line, "1. Grant that when we hear his voice // 2. we may know him who calls us each by name, // 3. and follow where he leads." So pull out that bulletin insert and follow along.

"Grant that when we hear his voice"

I find it compelling that the author of this collect chose to say "when" and not "if." It assumes that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is, in fact, doing his job and calling out to the sheep all the time. Now, some have heard an audible voice from God and have responded to it. But for many, the voice comes in other ways. Sometimes the voice of the Good Shepherd is not so much heard in our ears as it is felt in our heart, when there is an opportunity to show God's love to someone in some particular way and we know that this is Jesus calling us to respond.

Another way to hear his voice is in within the context of worship, in the words of a hymn, through the mystery of the eucharist, or in the written prayers that form and shape us. And of course, the best way the we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd is through Holy Scripture. The gospels of course bear witness to Jesus' life and contain things that he said. But God speaks in the Bible beyond the red letters. The whole sweep of salvation history is the story of God calling God's people to follow him and to know that they are called by their name.

The second part of the collect prays that "we may know him who calls us each by name." I'm sure you know how important it is to call someone by their name, and how awkward it can be when you forget someone's name and don't want to ask again. "Hey... man." "Hello there!" "Hey... you" \*cringe\* Well, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, according to our gospel, "knows [his] own and [his] own know him." Jesus doesn't forget our names. He knows who we are and loves us enough to lay down his life for us. Our task as sheep who hear the voice of the Good Shepherd is to listen to that voice so that we might know the call better.

Now, it's one thing to know about someone and it's a very different thing to know them. I know about Tom Brady, but I don't know him. Knowing about is fine. I know he's a great quarterback, loves his family, and eats avocado ice cream. But I don't know him. I don't have a relationship with him. But Jesus is different. Knowing things about Jesus is still important. We

know that he was a Jewish rabbi who lived 2000 years ago. That he taught in parables, performed miracles, was crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day rose again. But there's more to knowing him than just those facts. We don't have to settle for knowing about Jesus because Jesus is able to be known today by the Holy Spirit through Word, Sacrament, and through the lived experience of following him where he leads.

This is the most important part of the Collect because what good are sheep that hear the Good Shepherd's voice and know him who calls them by their name but don't follow him?! They'd just be standing there, gazing up at Jesus not doing anything! Sheep, and I'm talking about real sheep here, follow a shepherd not because they are mindless, but because they know that the shepherd is looking after them and that the shepherd will provide for them. They know the shepherd will make them lie down in green pastures, lead them beside still waters, and comfort them in times of danger.

This whole shepherd metaphor took on new life for me when I was on pilgrimage in the Holy Land a few years ago. Our guide, an archaeologist, biblical scholar, and former Secretary General (or #2 person) for the Archbishop of Canterbury, told us about the difference in shepherding in the East versus the West. In the West, shepherds and ranchers walk behind the flock or herd, shouting at them to move along and using physical force, either dog or whip, to get the wayward animals back in line. But in the East, the context in which Jesus was saying these words, a shepherd walked ahead of the animals and they followed his voice because they knew and trusted the shepherd. Western shepherding is based on doubt and discipline whereas shepherding in Jesus time was based on trust and grace.

So the Good Shepherd doesn't force the animals to go where he wants, he goes where he's going and the sheep whom he loves follow him there. Where does Jesus go? Jesus goes in and he goes out. He goes in to the heart of the Father and he goes out to lost and lonely. When we follow him we can know and be known by God the Father and we can serve and be served by those Jesus calls blessed--the poor, the meak, those who are hungry and thirsty. And of course, Jesus went to the Cross, to lay down his life for the sheep, and to bring sheep from beyond the fold of Israel into the kingdom of God. That's you and that's me and that's the whole world. So I pray with this collect that God would "grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads."

Amen