

St. Paul's, Concord  
11 & 12 May, 2019  
John 10:22-30 (Revelation 7:9-17)  
Rev. Kate Atkinson

Michael and I were driving through the English countryside a few years ago, and, at one point Michael wanted to take a look at the map. I think it was because we were lost but don't tell Michael I said that! Anyhow, we pulled off the road right next to a field of sheep.

When we first stopped the car, the sheep were way over on the other side of the field, but as soon as they spotted us, they started to come closer. And I don't mean just one or two of them either. The whole *flock* was on the move!

It just so happened that Britain was in the middle of a foot and mouth epidemic at that time, and it wasn't a very good idea to be in close contact with a flock of sheep. So the nearer the sheep got the more concerned I got! But I needn't have worried. As soon as they got close enough to hear our voices, they lost interest. They turned around and went back to their grazing.

Now I don't know what prompted those sheep to come running across the field when we pulled up. Maybe our car was the same color as their shepherd's car; or maybe we parked where he always parked. But they were only fooled for as long as they were out of earshot. When they realized that they didn't recognize our voices, they decided we weren't worth bothering with.

Shepherds will tell you that the relationship that develops between them and their sheep mainly depends on the way shepherds use their voice. Sheep are not particularly intelligent animals but they are very good at voice recognition. From a very young age, they can distinguish their shepherd's voice from any one else's. If substitute shepherds come to look after them — or if a couple of hopelessly lost tourists park by their field — they won't pay the slightest attention to *their* voices. Even if they're being called to a feeding or some other treat, they won't respond. They'll just look bewildered and wander off.

Sheep recognize and respond to their shepherd's voice because they're conditioned to do so. They learn to associate that voice with things that benefit them. Their shepherd calls them to food or water or shelter from harsh weather. Their shepherd calls them to make sure that they're safe and well; or calls them closer when there's danger nearby. The shepherd talks a ewe through a difficult lambing; and reassures a sick or injured animal. The shepherd's voice represents care, protection and comfort. In fact the shepherd's voice represents life itself to the flock.

John's gospel tells us that a crowd of Jews came to Jesus in the temple courtyard and demanded to know if he was the Christ. They complained that he'd been keeping them in suspense by not telling them — but Jesus replied that he *had* told them. In fact, he'd told them *many* times who he was but they hadn't paid any attention. They hadn't recognized Jesus' voice because they hadn't accepted him as their Shepherd. And so they were missing out on all the benefits that Jesus offers his flock.

John also tells us that this encounter took place at the time of the Feast of the Dedication — a Jewish festival we know as Hanukkah. It commemorates the Maccabean Revolt in 164 BC, when Judas Maccabaeus defeated the Syrian king Antiochus and rededicated the temple at Jerusalem. Maccabaeus went on to establish a royal house that lasted 100 years — so the Feast of the Dedication would have been a significant setting for the declaration of a new king. And the Jews were ready and waiting for a new king to be declared. Their study of scripture had prepared them to receive a Messiah who would win the greatest victory of all time — someone whose royal house would *never* be overthrown.

They were looking for *another* Judas Maccabaeus to lead his army into Jerusalem and wipe out the Roman oppressors. They wanted to seize their plunder — money, property, land, riches beyond imagining. And they wanted *all* of Jerusalem to be rededicated as the royal city, home of the chosen people of Israel. They wanted to be known throughout the world as the nation ruled by God’s anointed king: a king and a nation that could never be defeated.

As well as their knowledge of Jewish history and their expectation of God’s Messiah, the Jews were familiar with the biblical image of “shepherd” meaning king. In fact this may be why they accosted Jesus at the temple that day — because they’d heard his claim to be “the good shepherd.” At the beginning of John 10, Jesus describes the shepherd who calls his sheep by name, who leads them in safety and looks out for them. A few verses on, he talks about knowing his sheep and his sheep knowing him — and what that means when the flock is attacked by a wolf. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,” Jesus says. “I am the good shepherd.” (John 10:11 & 14)

But this was the *last* thing the Jews wanted to hear from their Messiah. They were happy enough with the idea of a king being *called* a shepherd but they were *not* prepared to accept a king who *acted* like a shepherd. And they certainly wouldn’t tolerate *Jesus’* claim to be the Messiah when he was so *far* from their concept of what that meant. So the religious leaders surrounded Jesus in the temple courtyard and demanded that he tell them plainly if he *was* the Christ. It’s unlikely they had any intention of believing him, they just wanted to hear him say it, probably so they could stone him for blasphemy.

What they didn’t understand — what they *couldn’t* understand — was that everything Jesus said proved that he is indeed the Christ. They couldn’t understand that because they didn’t belong to his flock; they weren’t his sheep. They didn’t *listen* to his voice because they didn’t *recognize* it. Jesus’ words fell on deaf ears.

But if there *had* been some of Jesus’ followers in the temple that day, what would *they* have heard when Jesus spoke?

A real flock of sheep — like the one Michael and I came across — they gain a sense of security from hearing their shepherd’s familiar voice. Because of their past experience in that person’s care, they have a crude understanding that — as long as that voice is audible — their needs will be met.

But the *Good Shepherd’s* flock hears a much greater promise.

For Jesus' flock too, there's that element of tenderness that the Jewish leaders reviled. In their view, tender protection was no kingly attribute. But the believers, the people who've placed their lives in Jesus hands, see things differently. They live in the knowledge that they are loved and treasured by their Shepherd. As long as they listen and respond to his voice, they know they're safe. They know that their most fundamental needs will be met.

But that doesn't mean that their lives will be without trauma or loss or pain. It doesn't mean that their bellies will always be full, or that they'll always have a supply of fresh water, or that warm clothing and shelter will always be provided when the weather is harsh. It doesn't even mean that they'll never be attacked. Like the wolf, prowling around the sheep fold, Satan is never far away from those who belong to the Lord.

And yet, the Good Shepherd's flock finds deep wells of strength and comfort to draw on every day — no matter what hardships there may be. And this is because the greatest benefit of belonging to Jesus is his gift of *eternal* life.

I don't think I'll ever forget the images we saw in the news during the foot and mouth crisis in Britain: farmyards full of dead animals, massive burial plots and flames leaping up as carcasses were incinerated. But worst of all were the faces and the voices and the tears of the farmers. It's hard to imagine how a shepherd would feel in a situation like that: After years of calling the animals to their food and water; urging them onto grassier pastures or into the shelter of the barn; coaxing, calming, encouraging — and then standing by helplessly while an entire flock is slaughtered.

Europe's foot and mouth crisis was a tragic and horrifying event, but it's also a striking illustration of an everyday occurrence. And that is that, no matter how well they're cared for, no matter how devoted their shepherd may be, sheep will eventually die. And not only sheep. The cycle of life and death is one of the greatest certainties there is in this world. Humankind may have discovered ways of prolonging life but we'll never defeat death. Only God can do that.

And *that* is why the Good Shepherd's flock can follow his voice with such confidence, no matter what trials we may endure. We can live through this earthly life knowing that we've been given eternal life — and that no one can take that away from us.

Our reading from Revelation reminds us that the Good Shepherd is *also* the Lamb who was slain. He was slain and yet he lives in heaven, enthroned and surrounded by great multitudes of worshippers — too many to count — the greatest and most powerful king there will ever be.

It takes courage to be one of the Good Shepherd's sheep. There will always be other voices urging us to listen to them instead. But Jesus knows every one of his followers completely and still loves us unconditionally. Once we choose to follow him and to listen to *his* voice, he will never let us go.