

Sunday February 5th, 2023

John 10:1-6
“Whose Voice Do You Hear?”

A father was reading the paper and decided to share what he'd been reading with his teenage son. The article claimed that children today suffered from a lack of attention and which caused low educational achievements at school. Furthermore, the article said that children today are lazy, have little concentration, and barely possess any listening skills at all. When he was finished the father asked, “Well, son what do you think about that study.”

The boy half-heartedly lifted his head and said, “What was that again, Dad?” Sometimes we don't listen, do we? We do that with our parents, and our spouse, and our children. Sometimes we do that to God and Jesus our Shepherd, too. Sometimes we're just content to be in the presence of the Shepherd. And that's OK. Sometimes. But sometimes we get so absorbed in what we're doing, what we're thinking, with ourselves, that we don't listen.

Kind of like the guy in one of the current, I think it's Geico, commercials. He's sitting watching television, eating popcorn. His very attractive wife walks in and asks “Honey, does this dress make me look fat?” And without even blinking, without even looking up he says: “You BETCHYA!” Of course, that's the wrong answer. And the guy is in big trouble because he didn't listen. He recognized his wife's voice, but he didn't listen.

Let's look at the passage for today John 10:1-6 and see what Jesus has to say about listening to The Voice of the Shepherd.

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

As we think about this passage today, it tells us that The Voice of the Shepherd Goes Before Us, The Voice of the Shepherd Guides Us, The Voice of the Shepherd Protects Us and The Voice of the Shepherd Tells Us Who We Are.

Maurice Boyd tells the story of Hugh Redwood, who was a celebrated lay preacher in England. He was in great demand as a speaker. During one period of his life, Redwood passed through a difficult time. He had some very hard decisions to make and wasn't sure what he should do. He was tempted to just give it all up, to run. He asked God for guidance, but as sometimes happens, it seemed that no guidance was given. The heavens were silent.

One evening he went to have dinner with some friends before going on to address a large public gathering. When the meal was over his hostess suggested he go to the study, put his feet up, and relax beside the fire. Redwood was glad for a little bit of peace and quiet, so that's what he did. As promised, he found a fire burning.

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As he sat down in one of the chairs, he noticed that on the table beside the chair was a KJV Bible. He picked it up and discovered it was open to Psalm 59. He began to read, and when he came to the tenth verse, he found these words underlined, “The God of my mercy shall prevent me.” The word “prevent” as used in the King James Version of the Bible means “to go before.” This is how John Wesley developed the idea of Prevenient Grace. God gracefully preparing us for salvation.

The text means, “The God of my mercy shall go before me.” Sure enough, someone had written a paraphrase of the text in the margin, “My God, in His loving-kindness, shall meet me at every corner.” Those words were so powerful, and became like a lamp turning on for Hugh Redwood. Later he made his hard decisions, and they proved to be wise ones. He didn’t run away, but went on to accomplish great things and to live a useful and fulfilled life.

“The God of my mercy shall go before me. My God, in His loving-kindness, shall meet me at every corner.” Or as the twenty-third psalm puts it, “The Lord is my Shepherd.”

I personally find great comfort in that idea. The Good Shepherd goes before us to prepare the way, which means there is no place that we go, that the Shepherd hasn’t already been. He’s already made sure the path is clear and safe. There may be hardships, there may be mishaps, there may be struggles: but The Good Shepherd has already seen those and knows how to help us negotiate through the treacherous territory. He has already prepared a way for us to get through. All we have to do, is continue to listen to His Voice. The Voice of the Shepherd Goes Before Us.

And when we prepare our hearts through prayer and worship, we are able to more fully and more clearly listen to the Voice of the Shepherd. And when we listen, The Voice of the Shepherd Guides Us. At the age of forty-seven, Nick Thomas found himself unemployed and under tremendous financial pressure. He had had a successful career in the Air Force and the insurance business, but a series of financial reversals had set him back, and the failure of his own consulting business had left him with no place to turn. He didn’t know what to do.

Frustrated and seeing no way out, Nick’s wife, Liz turned to prayer. Every morning she’d be in church praying that something good would happen to change their fortune. She was in church one morning, praying about their dilemma, when she thought she could almost hear the words, “Make the mustard.” Her family had a mustard recipe from Russia, and every Christmas she made this special mustard and gave it to her family and friends as a special gift. At first, she ignored the words. But they kept coming more and more persistent.

Reluctantly she told Nick. who, of course, thought she had gone mad. Liz had no idea from where or whom the voice came. But after considerable discussion and prayer, Nick and Liz decided to listen to the voice. She prepared a substantial amount of the mustard. They packaged it, and then called on a local cheese shop. The manager tasted it and immediately bought out their entire inventory. Within three months they had cracked the highly competitive New York major deli market.

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I believe that because the Thomases committed their troubles to prayer, and looked expectantly to God for guidance, and listened for the Voice of the Shepherd, God gave them the direction they needed.

You see, The Voice of the Shepherd Guides Us. Not only that, but The Voice of the Shepherd Protects Us. I say that because you have to make sure that the voice you are listening is the right voice. There are a lot of voices out there vying for your attention and loyalty. There are a lot of voices that want you to think they are The Voice of the Shepherd. When in reality, they are the voice of the thief Jesus describes in verse 10.

Bob's Famous Ice Cream Parlor in Bethesda, Maryland, was robbed, but manager Nathan Peabody was warned in time. Moments before the robbery he was contacted by telephone. The voice said, "Are you the manager? Listen carefully; don't panic. This is the police. You are going to be robbed. Do NOT resist. Let the robber have your money. We will be waiting right outside your store and we need to catch him with the money on him. Thank you for your cooperation."

Sure enough, a man with a scruffy beard and a knife came in demanding money. Mr. Peabody took all of his cash out of the drawer and gave it to him. Peabody watched as the robber left the store, waiting for the cops to close in. Instead, the robber just got in his car and drove away. And as he saw the taillights disappear in the distance, he realized what had just happened. He realized that the call hadn't come from police headquarters after all. But from the thief.

Jesus was right, [John 10:10] "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. [He, meaning Jesus] came that [we might] have life, and have it abundantly." Listening to The Voice of the Shepherd helps us in making hard choices, choices about who we are and what we believe and what is really important to us. The Voice of the Shepherd Protects Us. And by listening to The Voice of the Shepherd, He helps us choose.

A few years ago, Mark Cuban, owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, offered WGN Chicago Radio sports-talk host David Kaplan \$50,000 to change his name legally to "Dallas Maverick." When Kaplan politely declined, Cuban sweetened the offer. Cuban would pay Kaplan \$100,000 and donate \$100,000 to Kaplan's favorite charity if he took the name for one year. After some soul searching, and being bombarded by e-mails from listeners who said he was crazy to turn down the money, Kaplan held firm and told Cuban no.

Kaplan explained: "I'd be saying I'd do anything for money, and that bothers me. My name is my birthright. I'd like to preserve my integrity and credibility." The name "Christian" is our birthright. From the moment of our birth into the Kingdom of God, the Good Shepherd promises to lead us to green pastures and beside the still waters. He promises to restore our souls and leads us through the valley of the shadow of Death. The Voice of the Shepherd Protects Us.

And finally, The Voice of the Shepherd Tells Us Who We Are. Phillip Keller in his book, A SHEPHERD LOOKS AT PSALM 23, tells us that sheep are very fearful creatures. They simply won't lie down unless they sense the shepherd nearby. They need to know that he's present. We're like that. Jesus was right when he said we are like sheep without a shepherd.

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Not all of us but some of us. And we're fearful when we don't feel we belong. Bishop Gerald Kennedy once talked about a young girl who lived in an apartment in a big city, and after supper in the summer the children on the block gathered in the streets to play.

But after a while one would say that she had to go home because her mother told her to be in before eight o'clock. Or a father would whistle and a boy would have to leave. A mother would call and others would have to go. The girl said, "They would all go. It would get dark and I would be there all alone, waiting for my father or my mother to call me in. They never did."

How sad. There are children who don't know the voice of a caring parent, who never get called in or called home. They can do whatever they want as long as they don't get into any trouble or inconvenience the parents. When what they really want, what they really need is someone to care. Someone to call their name, with love, not filled with derision, someone to reach out and let them know they matter.

Sometimes, children grow into adults who, even after hearing all the promises of the God who loves us, who calls us by name, who gave His life for us, they still persist in living outside the flock. They question the voice of the Shepherd, or the sincerity of the Voice. They question the other sheep in the flock, whether they will accept them or not. Or worse, they don't think they can be worthy of that love, even after the Shepherd has rescued them and has bent down to give them refreshing water.

But that really doesn't matter to God, it really doesn't matter to the Shepherd. That's why He came. That's why He gave His life on the cross. He loves you. The Shepherd loves those who don't want to have anything to do with Him. He even loves those sheep who wander away, who are distracted by the little clump of enticing greenery and suddenly find themselves separated from the rest of the flock.

That's when the Shepherd comes searching for them and brings them back into the fold and reminds them where they belong and to whom they belong. Why? Because The Voice of the Shepherd Tells Us Who We Are. Jesus said: "the sheep hear [the Shepherd's] voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

Imagine, if you will, that it was a beautiful spring day. Taking in the view we look out and we notice a large patch of pasture, 3-5 acres. All of a sudden, from two directions, we see a couple of shepherds bringing their flocks. Both have about 25 or 30 sheep apiece. The sheep go into the pasture to graze, and the two shepherds stand at the gate exchanging greetings and swapping local gossip.

After a bit of time, one of the shepherds opens the gate and hollers something. We don't know what it was, but the sheep sure did. All the heads of the sheep in his flock came up. He hollered something else, and here they came. Its quite a sight. But the truth is even more amazing. Sheep will only respond to the voice of their own shepherd. You and I can call all we want but our voice is unknown, and the sheep will not respond.

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The Voice of our Good Shepherd is here whispering His love for us. Calling us and wooing us into an ongoing relationship. The Voice of the Shepherd Goes Before Us, The Voice of the Shepherd Guides Us, The Voice of the Shepherd Protects Us and The Voice of the Shepherd Tells Us Who We Are.

All we have to do is tune our hearts and souls and ears to The Voice of the Shepherd.

Jesus calls, but he's not as annoying as the Verizon guy, you won't hear, "Can you hear me now?" But if your heart and soul and ears are tuned to Christ you will hear The Voice of the Shepherd. Are you listening?