

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28)

"My sheep hear my voice," Jesus said. (pause) During the past week, our ears have been ravaged by the news of the Boston Marathon bombings, then the violent manhunt, and finally the capture of the second fugitive. We have also watched reports of the huge fire and explosions in West, Texas, and earthquakes on the other side of the globe. The Senate defeated a gun control bill. As the world and events near and far roll by, or over us, I have to ask, in light of today's scripture: Have we, in the midst of the breaking news and noises of this week, heard - and recognized - our Shepherd's voice?

Several years ago when I lived on Long Island I was riding the train into NYC one day. A man and woman sat in the seat behind me, discussing everything from their spouses to their children to their jobs and the economy.... I found myself listening to them. They were extremely concerned with the quality of their children's schools, the best kind of cellular telephone service to have, the good and clever deals they had made in their respective businesses, whether either family should consider moving down to North Carolina, where everything (according to them) is better than up here... They discussed their mutual friends, their houses on the water, the pitiful plight of public education and the fact that the other parents in their district simply didn't have a clue as to how bad things were.... There was such an aura of "see me, I'm superior" throughout the conversation that my heart as well as my ears actually began to ache. Everything seemed to be directed toward self-serving goals. There was never any expression of compassion or social conscience or a sense of the larger world. By the time we had reached Jamaica to change trains, I found myself feeling very discouraged about the direction and goals of my own generation.

They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Tim 4:4 NIV) It would seem that too often folks have done precisely this.

A few years ago a person who professed to be Christian made the following response in one of the religious surveys: "I think all the God-stuff I was brought up with is good. I don't go to church any more, and I don't pray or read the Bible, but I do find it comforting to think that there is a God watching over this mess of a world. I think we who are Christians live pretty decent lives because of our faith. And, when it comes to death, the God-stuff is good insurance." (Source confidential)

We know the voices of the world: "If you're going to make it, you'd better look successful, don't show too much emotion, don't let yourself be vulnerable to others, be sure to play your cards right... Whatever you do, don't be a loser! A loser. Theologian Robert Raines gave a neat definition of what it means to lose:

"To lose, fundamentally, is to not be in control of whatever is vitally important to you. It's to run into walls that don't move. It's to fall over cliffs that you didn't build and didn't see. It's to learn that there are no guarantees. Life makes losers of us all."

Life's voices often accuse us of being out of control, and then lure us with promises of being able to be in control. Life's voices accuse us of being potential losers. The noise of these voices can keep us from hearing God's voice in our lives. GOD's voice tells us we belong to something bigger than we

are, something stronger than any trouble we will ever face, someone who will love us all the way through life and through death.... We *belong*. We have a Shepherd.

“My sheep know my voice...” Maybe sheep are smarter than we tend to think. In her book, *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a conversation she had with a friend who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. According to him, sheep are not dumb at all. “It is the cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led.” You push cows, her friend said, but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first—namely, their shepherd—who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right. Sheep know their shepherd and their shepherd knows them. He went on to say that it never ceased to amaze him, growing up, that he could walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step foot in the fold without causing pandemonium. Sheep & shepherds develop a language of their own.

Craig Brian Larson told the story of a three-year old with his Dad in the middle of a swimming pool. The father, for fun, starting walking slowly toward the deep end, gently chanting, “Deeper and deeper and deeper,” as the water rose higher on the child. The boy’s face registered increasing anxiety, and he held all the more tightly to his father, who, of course, easily touched the bottom.

Had the little boy been able to analyze his situation, he would have realized that there was no reason to be afraid. The water’s depth in any part of the pool was over his head. Even in the shallowest part, had he not been held up, he’d have drowned. His safety anywhere in that pool depended on his father.

At various points in our lives, most of us feel we’re getting in over our heads, out of our depths, without control — problems abound, a job is lost, a relationship broken, someone dies. Our temptation is to panic, for we feel that we’ve lost control. Yet, as with the child in the pool, the truth is we’ve never been in control over the most valuable things of life. We’ve always been held up by the grace of God, our Father, and that does not change. God is never out of God’s depth, and therefore we are as safe when we’re “going deeper” as we have ever been. (Larson, *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, edited)

In the gospel lesson, the Jewish authorities of Jesus' time did not recognize the Shepherd's voice because of the roar of their own need to have things just as they thought they ought to be. A little background may help. In our lesson the Jewish authorities approached Jesus and asked, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

This dialogue between the authorities and Jesus follows Jesus' healing of the man born blind. This healing had increased the tension between them, for the authorities considered a person born blind to be unclean and sinful before God.

Jesus answered the authorities: "I told you and you do not believe." He had already clearly enunciated the good news of God's grace. ...In contrast to those who said that one had to do something to win the affection of God, Jesus came proclaiming the message that God loves us, the world, now, in spite of sin, greed, grumpiness or failure.

Strangely enough, it was religious people who were not able to believe this. They had worked so hard to accomplish a system by which one could be saved; they had struggled with keeping the laws and regulations pure ... They found it inconceivable that the very ones they cast out in the name of religion could be touched and claimed by the Messiah.

The man born blind regained his sight. The lame man walked... The proof was in front of them, yet the religious authorities could not connect the events around them with the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy." (Is 35:5,6)

So who hears and connects today? Who can dare trust these days? Perhaps it is the one who can let go of his/her grip and control and understanding and security and say simply: "God loves me as constantly as the best of shepherds loves and cares for his sheep. God who was willing to lay down his life for me. I can trust God, even when I suffer, even when everything seems uncontrollable, even when I feel like I don't belong, even when I can't touch bottom...."

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me." (pause)

As a six year-old I tried really hard to hear God's voice after I heard the minister say in his sermon that if we'd ask God to speak to us, God would. I listened, and listened...and was disappointed, because I heard no magnificent, booming voice. I had no hard proof.

The Jewish authorities wanted proof before they would accept Jesus as the Messiah. We often demand the same: "Prove it, God: Prove to me that you're really here; prove to me that you're really taking care of my situation; give me proof, then I'll believe."

The message of Jesus in the scriptures seems to suggest something else: "Follow me, visit the sick and hungry, relieve the oppressed, receive little children, welcome the outcast. Do these things in my name, and then you WILL believe."

Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice." We belong to God. Jesus and the Father are one. Those who are Christ's sheep are safe in God's hand. An old German woodcutting depicts a tiny seedling growing in the ground, while two great hands form a protective arch over it...It is safe in the Father's hands. (pause)

"My sheep know my voice." There is much noise which would keep us hearing everything else, which would convince us deep down inside that somehow we've missed out..."Somehow I can't hear God's voice." But the Bible tells us something else. Its message is for you, and for me, and for anyone who would turn to God. And no storm can take it away; no illness, no war, no government, no bombings...Nothing you do can take away God's love for you. God knows each of us - how we really are inside. The Shepherd knows his sheep, knows where they'll do something stupid, knows where they are weak... But the shepherd also knows their value, and has decided that they are worth even his life.

We hear the voices and noises of this world with terrifying clarity. But deeper still is the voice of God, for each one of us. The voice of our Shepherd tells us we belong to him, that we and all we love

are held in his everlasting arms, that the kingdom of God has a room with our names on it.

Martin Luther once said, "I have held many things in my hands, but I have lost them all. Only that which I have placed in God's hands, I still have."

Pain and scary things in life will continue. Children will make bad decisions, adults will make bad mistakes. Illness will strike, accidents will happen... Schedules will be excruciatingly full or painfully empty. Life will yell its way forward. The water will seem too deep... But God is our Shepherd.

As the reading from Revelation states: "Those who gather at the end time will not gather having escaped grief and sorrow, having avoided mourning and death, having eluded choices and consequences. Their robes will have been red. But their robes will not remain red; they will be made white, for they will not gather alone. The Lamb is with them, the Lamb who, now victorious, has become their Shepherd!"

We have a Shepherd. We have an incredible promise of God's love for you and for me. And we have a challenge: Listen for, get to know, and HEAR the voice of the Shepherd; let it connect with your days, let it comfort your nights... To hear the voice of the Shepherd is to do God's will. It is to love our neighbor, and to forgive even when we have been badly hurt. It is to keep before us the incredible vision of God's persistent love for a bunch of sinful, often crabby people. It is to move forward without proof into a noisy world and do our best to share love with those we meet.

In the midst of this complicated, scary world and our pressure-filled lives, may we recognize the voice of the One who has given up his life to be our Shepherd; and may we follow and serve him, all the days of our lives. Amen.