

In the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus our Shepherd said, "The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...and the sheep follow him because they know his voice..." Then, apparently still trying to get his hearers to understand, Jesus said, "I am the door. If anyone enters through me, he will be saved, and will come in and go out, and find pasture... I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Jesus is the Shepherd. Jesus is the gate, the way in to safety for the sheep. And, in verse 11, which immediately follows today's lesson, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." My sheep know my voice...

The other night I was sitting in the living room with our dogs, Daisy and Berkeley, when suddenly there was noise at the back door. It startled us, and the dogs jumped up and stood listening intently, unsure whether to bark or run hide. We heard more noise, and then my husband Woody's voice came through the back hall. When Daisy and Berkeley heard Woody's voice, everything was suddenly wonderful. Tails wagging, they rushed to meet Woody, overjoyed that he was home. They know Woody's voice and find safety and delight in it. "The sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice." I wonder if we are as quick to know and recognize *God's* voice in our lives as my dogs are to know Woody's?

It is told that many years ago, Dr. Campbell Morgan was a prominent preacher in England. One day Dr. Morgan went to visit a member of his church, only to learn that she was about to be evicted from her house because she couldn't pay the rent. That was on Saturday afternoon, so the next day Dr. Morgan told his congregation that he wanted enough money from them to pay for a member's rent. They gave it to him. First thing on Monday morning he went to the woman's house with the money. He could hardly wait to tell her the good news. He hammered on the door, but there was no answer. He knocked again, but no one answered, and he went sadly away. Some time later he discovered that the woman had been at home all the time. She had been afraid to answer the door, because she thought it was the landlord who had come for the rent, not realizing that it was her minister bringing her the money she desperately needed. (told by Dr. R. Maurice Boyd)

Perhaps we do similar things when it comes to God. How many times has our fear kept us from receiving a special blessing in life, kept us from living more fully than we do? Remember Jesus' words: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly..." (John 10:10..) How many of us have allowed our Shepherd to lead us to abundant life?

Abundant life? We may find it easier to define what is NOT so abundant about life. Life that is NOT abundant tends to be life centered on one's self, it is folks struggling to "get ahead," it is buying into the "me-first" mentality so heavily promoted throughout our society. It is life one has to *make* for oneself. It is life that is not seen as a gift. It feels defeated and let down and probably scared of what lies ahead. Life of this sort is never satisfied. It always needs something more to make it "happy." (pause) A man wrote: "They say the Lord's my shepherd, but I

wouldn't know. I never heard his voice. Any water I have found in my forty years has been brackish and bitter. No still waters and only a jaded, sarcastic soul. No restoration here. I have enemies, but nobody offers me anything to eat – nothing is prepared for me. I am not led; I will wander hopelessly until I am dead, and then that will be that...No dwelling, no forever. I never heard his voice.”

This man never learned that this Shepherd stuff really does have something to offer him. Maybe nobody told him. Maybe he didn't listen.

So what *is* abundant life? “Abundant life” does not mean a lot of money or even an easy time in life. It means peace deep down where we need it; it means life that is seen as a gift; it means you know you're not alone no matter what happens or does not happen in your life.

On the front cover of today's bulletin, Paul's words to Timothy encourage him in his faith. Listen to the reading in context: “Timothy, I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:5-7 with some omissions)

How do we come to recognize the voice of our Shepherd? My parents took me to church every Sunday, so I learned a lot there as I also developed a lot of questions about God. My mother and father did not tell me that God was important with their words as much as they did by their actions. Church was a huge priority for them; God was important. I learned that because I saw it as my father prepared to lead the adult bible study. I saw it as they turned down Sunday morning invitations because of their commitment to get their kids to church. But even more, my mother took time, as I grew older, to share with me how God had helped her at a time in her life when she felt totally overwhelmed and powerless. My mother, whom I considered to be very strong, told me how she finally cried out to God for help: “I cannot handle these things on my own, Lord; please help me.” Again and again throughout my life, my mother's testimony - even years after her death - has reminded me that I, too, can ask my Shepherd for help. My mother's faith helped me to know my Shepherd's voice, which is why I am up here today.

The Lord is our Shepherd. He wants us to know his voice, and he invites us to follow him. We can call on him for help, for direction, for discernment so that we can know what is of value and what is not.

It has been said that Soren Kierkegaard once told a parable about two thieves who broke into a jewelry store, but instead of stealing the jewels they simply switched the price tags. They put high-priced tags on cheap jewelry and low-priced tags on valuable gems. For several weeks no one noticed. People bought cheap jewelry for exorbitant prices and rare jewels for spare change. Kierkegaard's point is pretty obvious: sometimes we have difficulty discerning between what is valuable and what is worthless. (Original source of story not found; Snopes.com has interesting comments of its possible veracity)

Sometimes we lose sight of what is really valuable in our lives. When we lose our health, it is

too often only then that we realize the value of good health. We do not always see the best way to spend our time, our abilities, our money. We need a Shepherd just as badly as sheep need one, for without God, our choices and decisions are all over the place. The Ten Commandments are God's first guidelines for us, for they tell us that we need to honor God in our lives and that we must show love and respect to each other. God, though, has given God's human "sheep" free will, which means that we really do get to choose whether or not to honor and obey and follow our Lord.

Last night's evening news had reports of airplane passengers expressing total relief and thanksgiving after their plane filled with smoke after they had taken off from Los Angeles. "Everybody was praying. We didn't think we'd make it. It was God's will that we were able to land." (ABC news 5/10/2014) Suddenly God was important! Too often it takes total disruption in our lives before we turn to God. This means that too many of us do NOT really know our Shepherd's voice, because we've been tuning our ears to everything but God.

In many ways the church - imperfect as it is - is a sort of sheepfold, a place of shelter, where we hopefully learn to recognize God's voice. Here we are reminded of our identity, to Whom we ultimately belong. Here we are told that God wants us to be sure to share our faith with others. We are to teach our children. We are to read the Bible and struggle to let it strengthen and challenge us to see God at work in our lives.

In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, chapter 21:3-7, the promise of the Great Shepherd is again extended. This is a promise by the God whose very Word was able to begin Creation: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; {4} he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." {5} And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." {6} Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. {7} Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children."

A huge promise offered to us by our Maker and our Shepherd. To the missing girls in Nigeria, to the people in the burning balloon, to all mothers and fathers who have buried a child, and to every one of us who will some day come to the final breath of our lives, this is worth billions! It is life, and it freedom from the fear of death. This declares that no matter what happens in this world or in our lives or in the lives of those we love, God our Shepherd is *still* in charge, still leading us along the varying paths of our lives, still offering us peace and a dwelling place forever!

May we hear God's offer of still waters even in the midst of our worst storms, may we recognize God's voice speaking our names, and may we dare to let our Lord show us how to live abundantly, so that our hearts declare and share with others: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not

want!

Let us pray:

Dear God, when everything presses in on us in life, and we aren't sure what we are hearing, open our ears to the frequencies of your voice. Let us know that you are always, every day, the Shepherd who loves us and yearns to lead us. Please help each of us to listen for and trust you. We thank you, God, that your understanding is sufficient for our every need; and that, through the life of Jesus given for the sake of his flock, we belong to you. May we honor you, today and forever. Amen

Our hymn is "Pass It On." It only takes a spark, a word, one sharing of faith, to help someone else come to abundant life. May it be so.