

Here we are again. You are ready to listen to a sermon. I am ready to deliver what I have prepared. We've heard the scriptures, we've shared the 23rd Psalm. May God's Holy Spirit move among us and help us to hear what God wants us to hear. Amen.

“My sheep know my voice...” As I grow older, I have more and more trouble hearing things, especially when there's a lot of background noise. In fact, I find myself often wanting to criticize people for not speaking up or not speaking more clearly. Deep inside, though, I know the trouble most of the time is with me; my ears simply do not hear as well as they once did.

I bring this up because after the worship service last week, Sarah Z was telling me about Emelia's familiarity with God's presence and voice. And another parent recently told me how she had dreaded letting her child know that a family member had died, and was totally surprised when her child accepted the death quite well, telling the mother that the family member was okay and was with God. I wonder: Perhaps it's not only our adult ears that can become dull with age, but also our ability to recognize God's voice in our lives. Maybe we need spiritual hearing aids!

There is much noise in our world, background and foreground. Inward noise and external noise. The outside noises can be upsetting and unsettling, as we hear of threats and crimes and disasters. But the inner noises tend to be the most destructive. They are the voices within us that convince us that we don't belong, that God could not really love us, that somehow we are left out. Our faults and our fears seem bigger and more real than God does, and we cannot hear our Shepherd's voice at all.

My sheep know my voice.... The Lord is my Shepherd...

From childhood on, Christians are often told that God will show us the way in life, that God will take care of us...That if we are faithful, God will give us blessing and peace. But then we see kind people get cancer, or we go through some sort of devastation, and we may wonder what happened to our Shepherd. Has God forgotten about me?

But if life worked so that things turned out just the way we want them to, God would be the one following *us*, following our commands and demands. We would have “programmed” God by our own manipulative behavior. If I'm good, God, YOU better be good! LISTEN UP: If there's one thing the walk of a Christian in this world teaches us, it is that we cannot dictate to God; WE are not in charge no matter how much we want to be ... We are called to follow God, to trust that God really is our Shepherd, even if we see no evidence of God's presence with us.

Remember last week, from the reading from Acts, chapter 9, Ananias was a Christian who was called by God to do something incredibly scary: he was told to go and see a man who had been threatening to wipe out all the Christians, the man named Saul. Ananias did not like his assignment, but he carried it out anyway, even though in many ways it must have seemed life-threatening. By his willingness to hear the voice of his Lord and do something that went against

his good sense and even frightened him, Ananias made it possible for Saul to come to know Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Ananias became an instrument of God's grace and healing for Saul, later called Paul.

To follow the way of Jesus and the promptings of God's Holy Spirit when it doesn't seem too smart to do so requires a huge leap of faith. That's exactly the leap you and I are asked to take. There is nothing easy about LIVING as a Christian in this world. In our country we can claim the identity of Christian easily enough, and say that we believe in Jesus and that we think we're saved. But to really *follow* Jesus, to let him be our Shepherd, can be hard and scary. Somewhere I read that the shepherd's staff has two ends: one, the crook, can pull a sheep out of trouble; the other end, though, can be used to PROD the sheep, to get it to move. Letting our Lord be our Shepherd means that he may pull us out of trouble, but that he also wants us to go in HIS way, not our own. And it means trying to listen for the Shepherd's voice over all the other noises and voices of our world.

A humorous and surely fictitious illustration to show what God is NOT like: A new kind of plane was on its first flight. It was full of reporters and journalists. A little while after takeoff, the captain's voice was heard over the speakers. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to be your pilot for this plane's historic first flight. I can tell you the flight is going well. Nevertheless, I have to tell you about a minor inconvenience that has occurred. The passengers on the right side can, if they look out their window, see that the closest engine is slightly vibrating. That shouldn't worry you, because this plane is equipped with four engines and we are flying along smoothly at an acceptable altitude. As long as you are looking out the right side, you might as well look at the other engine on that side. You will notice that it is glowing, or perhaps one should say, burning. That shouldn't worry you either, since this plane is designed to fly with just two engines if necessary, and we are maintaining an acceptable altitude and speed. As long as we are looking out the plane, those of you on the left side shouldn't worry if you look out your side of the plane and notice that one engine that is supposed to be there is missing. It fell off about ten minutes ago. Let me tell you that we are amazed that the plane is doing so well without it. However, I will call your attention to something a little more serious. Along the center aisle all the way down the plane a crack has appeared. Some of you are, I suppose, able to look through the crack and may even notice the waves of the Atlantic Ocean below. In fact, those of you with very good eyesight may be able to notice a small lifeboat that was thrown from the plane. Well, ladies and gentlemen, you will be happy to know that your captain is keeping an eye on the progress of your plane from that lifeboat below."

Sometimes life may feel similar to that plane flight. Everything around us seems to be falling apart and the person in charge seems to be as remote as the captain in the raft on the ocean far below. But the person in charge of *our lives* is not remote. He is our Shepherd and he is leading the way. Leading us; giving us eternal life; assuring us we will never perish; and that *no one* can snatch you out of his everlasting and loving arms. Lee Griess, *Taking The Risk Out Of Dying*, CSS Publishing Company, 1997 (edited by fte)

"My sheep know my voice..." Throughout my life I have heard Psalm 100 quoted: "We are

God's people, the sheep of His pasture..." Perhaps the biggest difference between sheep and us may be that the sheep know their shepherd and listen for the shepherd's voice, while we can go along for years, sometimes for a lifetime, telling ourselves that we don't need our Shepherd, that we have intellect and goals and miles to go before we sleep. But there's a problem, for if we do not attend to the task of learning to listen for God's voice in our lives, we won't recognize it when we finally realize that we need it.

Years ago I visited a man in a hospital. I'd never met him, since he was one of the many members of my church that was listed but never seen. He said to me, "I haven't been in church since my grandmother used to take me when I was a kid. I went to college and then enlisted in the service, then came home and married and started a family and had a demanding job; there never seemed to be time or real reason to go to church. Things were going well, I was happy. Then the kids grew up and I retired and now Martha has died. I'm still doing okay, except for this emphysema. I appreciate your visit, but I would feel like a hypocrite to try to get in good with God now. I've ignored him most of my life. How could I ever think that he would care about me now?"

Do you know, as we talked, we became friends. And Bill ended up coming to church, eventually every Sunday, and sometimes he would come to the Saturday prayer group, too. And though he had huge trouble breathing, he would often carry in bags of groceries for our food pantry. He became a real part of our congregation, and God became a real part of his life. A sheep, who learned to hear the voice of his Shepherd, and who tried to be obedient by showing love for others.

What about our lives, today? Has God been prodding, calling us, asking us to *follow* Jesus instead of charging ahead into our lives as though we are spooked by the fear of illness, loss of status, discomfort, or whatever else threatens to undo us?

"My sheep know my voice." "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8) And Jesus told us plainly: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself."

"My sheep know my voice." Our world says that we should not get involved, that we mustn't let ourselves become too vulnerable to others, that we have to look out for "Number One" (ourselves), and that if we're not in the "fast lane" somebody else is going to get whatever it is we're racing to find.

Our Lord Jesus says to stop and listen for God's voice. Jesus tells us that it is better to give than to get. He counsels us to show love to our enemies and to pray for those who hurt us. He tells us that just as God forgives us (and Jesus says God does!), we must forgive others. When we do these things, as best we can (He knows we are not perfect!), we will be following our Shepherd, our Savior.

As we sit here right now, and as we head into this coming week and all our days and times ahead, may we have ears eager to hear and recognize the voice of God, the Shepherd who loves us, who claims us as his beloved sheep, and who invites us to follow. May it be so, In Jesus' name, Amen.