

The Fourth Sunday of Easter,
Preacher: The Rev. Susan K. Bock
April 29, 2007

He makes it sound so simple, doesn't he? "My sheep hear my voice, and they follow."

But, as we all know, it's anything but simple.

For one thing, there are a *thousand other* voices, sounding in our ears and hearts, all the time.

There's the voice of consumerism: Buy this. Buy it now. Pay for it *so much later* it'll be like getting it *free!* Hurry! You need it. You deserve it. You gotta have it.

There's the voice of the media: The sky is falling, the news is all bad, abandon all hope!

There's the voice of the politicians: Be afraid. Be very afraid. You can't trust anyone...but me, of course. Vote for me, and I'll make you safe.

There's the voice of the culture: Live for yourself. Do unto others before they do unto you.

There are the voices of family and friends who insist we do, and be, and give what *they* need us to do and be and give.

And the voices of the Church, the lodge, the associations, the workplace: Follow these rules and these creeds. Meet our demands.

There are the voices of other times, tempting us to forsake the wonder and grace of the present moment and regret the past or fear the future.

There are the constant inner voices of guilt (You really blew it this time!) And shame (You're no damned good!) And depression (What's the use?) And addiction (You know you can't live without that.) And bitterness (Never forget, never forgive.)

So many voices! A noisy cacophony that bombards us with lies, clamoring to be loudest, vying for our loyalty, confusing our inner compass.

In this most recent environmental crisis concerning the honeybees, one theory about their demise is that, because of the increased sound wave transmissions from millions of cell phones, the bees' inner radar gets confused. They get lost and can't find their way home. It's a tragedy in itself, but also a tragic metaphor for our own lostness as we try to hear that one, true, clear, sweet voice of our Shepherd.

My sheep hear my voice, and they follow.

Like it's simple, when we know it's not. But we can learn to hear that voice, training our hearts to listen and know when that voice speaks. Like Jesus did, training his heart to hear the voice of

God, his Shepherd.

First, in scripture, which leapt to his lips in the hardest of times, because he knew it so well. His heart was so trained, in fact, to God's voice in the scriptures, that when people or devils misused the scriptures, he could discern the lies in their words.

People abuse scripture all the time to misquote God's truths. But, with time spent in the scripture, we can learn to discern God's voice from others that are in them. It's a voice that never stirs up hate or fear, but only builds up, binds together, calls higher, and heals. Spending time in the scriptures, you can learn to hear God's voice in them.

Second, in the community. The Good Shepherd calls out to each and every heart, even yours. But it's the community who helps us interpret, understand, and be faithful to that call. It was only as Jesus became more deeply immersed in the life of the community, truly loving his own and so many others, that his call to Jerusalem that Passover finally made any sense. "Become the Lamb" said the Shepherd. And because he loved them, he could hear, and give his life.

Third, in prayer. When we finally take time to show up for prayer, and sit still, and get quiet, we find the Shepherd already there, waiting, because he enjoys our coming to solitude to meet him and listen. Imagine that! God waiting on you! God enjoying your company! In the silence of the quieted heart, the noise will fade, and God will speak, telling you the secrets of heaven and your own belovedness.

Fourth, believe it or not, in heartache and sorrow. We can learn to hear the Shepherd speak right out of the middle of our saddest, hardest things. Because in those times our hearts are more open, and, in those times, God is making room in our hearts and lives for himself, and because, in those times, God would never leave us alone.

You may not hear from God, in those times, words, explanations, or answers. You may hear only God's heart, beating in time with yours. And God breathing with your breaths. But it will be enough. So, in times of sorrow and grief, don't despair, or run, or hide. Stay. Wait. Listen deeply. The Shepherd will speak.

And fifth, in your own heart's truth. You'll hear the Shepherd in your own inner voice and knowing. God made our hearts to hear him. Teresa of Avilla said that the voice of the Shepherd is so sweet that the soul, upon hearing it, cannot help but follow. In the end, we can trust our hearts to hear and know, because they are fine-tuned to that one voice.

And there are other ways: through nature, or the words of friend or stranger, or in the unfolding of life as it comes.

Of course, we don't have to listen. We don't have to hear. We can train ourselves, like the angry leaders in the gospel today, through fear, suspicion, rigidity and doubt, not to hear. But when we realize the Shepherd is speaking to our very own heart, revealing his secrets, naming us Beloved, why would we not want to hear it? We can train our hearts to hear that one, true, sweet, clear voice that calls us to himself.

Today, two sets of loving, responsible parents are putting their children up for adoption. In baptism, these parents bravely give them up, and we bring them to God for adoption, who then gives them back to us all, all new. In the waters, God kills their own life and makes them citizens of a whole other country, citizens of grace, and gives them the voice of the Shepherd to lead and guide them always.

We can't protect these children from harm, or promise them safety and peace, but we can teach them hearing of that voice that calls them "Beloved child" and whispers at their shoulder, "This is the way; walk in it." The better trained they are to hear and recognize that voice, the more ready and able they'll be to take up their own particular work in the name of Jesus Christ.

Listen. Learn to listen. First, close your eyes and imagine that cacophony. Try to hear all those voices at once. Can you hear them? "You should really hurry and buy that. There's so much danger out there. Don't let your guard down. Be afraid. Look out for number one. Do this. Give that. You are hopeless. You'll never change. The future is bleak...don't trust it, or yourself, or anyone else."

Now answer those voices with the voice of the Shepherd:

I don't really need that; my Shepherd supplies my needs. There's nothing I want. Though I walk through death's valley, I won't be afraid; he's with me. He spreads a banquet table for all his children, and there's room and plenty for all. (I hope it's getting quiet now in your heart.) God leads me beside still waters so I can drink, and rest, and do the one thing needed right now with loving attention. My Shepherd never condemns or shames. (I hope it's even quieter, still).

And all the other voices...quiet them, too, and now listen for the truthful voice of One who loves you. No less than to Jesus, Samuel, Mary, Saul, Elijah, Peter, and Hagar, does the Shepherd speak to you. He says:

Do not be afraid, I am with you.
When you gather in my name, I am among you.
The Kingdom of Heaven is right there inside you.
I'm making ready a heaven for you.
Come to me, and I will give you rest.
No one can ever snatch you out of my hand.
I have made you, wondrously, beautifully.
I have a work for you.
Listen for my voice, and follow.
I love you, and you are mine.

Amen.