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Psalm 23

John 10:22-30

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

A number of years ago, I was asked to be part of a search committee to hire a shepherd. As someone who has never lived in a rural area, I realized I lacked experience in knowing what qualities a shepherd needed to have, so I let it be known that I was looking for a bit of input. Soon thereafter, I got a call from someone who offered this advice: "You shouldn't have very high standards in your employee search because it would cost too much in salary to find someone who was very attentive. There isn't a whole lot to the job anyway." I asked the party on the phone whether he had the best interests of the sheep in mind and he insisted, "Oh, I love sheep." But then he began to talk about recipes for lamb chops, roast leg of lamb, lamb curry, lamb shawarma, and lamb stew. I looked at the caller I.D. and it indicated I was talking to Tom Wolfe. Somehow, I decided he didn't have the 'right stuff' to help me find a quality shepherd.

Soon thereafter, I got another call from someone else who wanted to influence the process the search committee would follow. The voice said: "I am a religious sort and I believe rather strongly that God provided each animal with certain appetites and with capacities to address those appetites. Why should there even be a shepherd?" Then he went on to say that God created sheep to be slow of foot and to have a good taste; certainly God was giving certain clues through the nature of things. I again looked at the caller I.D. It was listed as a call from Peter Coyote. The conversation seemed to have a bit of a 'jagged edge.' I could almost imagine the caller pausing a full second to say a prayer of thanksgiving before chowing down on a lamb it had caught in the absence of a good shepherd.

I got a third call, and before I answered it this time, I looked to see who was calling. It was listed as Michael J. Fox, and I decided not to answer the call, figuring it was time to get 'back to the present' concern.

For a different kind of input, I turned to a description of the ideal shepherd in a passage I had learned as a child, comparing our Lord to a shepherd. There we find a depiction of a shepherd who is diligent and caring in meeting the needs of the flock. The shepherd does not just take the sheep to where they can feed on the scruffiest of tumbleweed, but instead leads them toward green pastures. There is not just a bit of dirty water found to allow a sip or two, but instead the sheep get led to still waters that refresh more than just physical thirst. The guidance that is offered can keep the sheep from getting separated from each other and lost. Even when the flock has to go through a difficult or scary place, the shepherd's faithful presence reassures them and keeps them moving toward a better place to be. Although the word 'love' is not in the 23rd Psalm, this shepherd metaphor describes in part how the Lord shows love for all of us who are in God's care.

In John's Gospel, Jesus refers to his followers as his sheep. When we know a bit about the qualities of sheep, or the lack thereof, we might not take that as the greatest compliment. But our common human foibles actually make it fairly accurate imagery and they make it that much clearer that we are in need of a caring shepherd. Jesus also says of his followers: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." None of the gospel accounts give a description of what Jesus' voice sounded like. I imagine that his voice was not shrill, gruff, or monotonous, but we can only imagine what his voice really sounded like. What Jesus says about his own voice is that his sheep hear it and then they know they can follow him.

From what we know about Jesus, I would say, particularly when we have been wandering a bit, that Jesus' voice would take on more of a beckoning quality instead of a badgering one. There are certain kinds of leaders or shepherds who, in trying to keep their sheep in line, might use a shaming kind of voice. But Jesus as shepherd has a voice that is affirming and encouraging. It is the kind of encouraging that doesn't just make us feel better, but that inspires us to be filled with courage to work for what is better for others. This is a shepherd's voice that doesn't just bark out orders, but that can hold back in order to listen to what even the most timid lamb is trying to say. Through the voice, we pick up the sense of deep concern for the needs of all of the sheep, not just the ones who we think might

be the most important. As we keep listening to the voice, we grow in our capacity to trust that voice of the good shepherd who calls our name.

In the first church I served, there was an older woman who had no family other than her church family. I will refer to her as Arlene. She lived in her modest house by herself. Someone from the church had already been helping her with finances. But then she had a hospital stay, during which some of her friends from church were talking about her increased dementia, figuring that she would need assistance when she came home. The group got permission from Arlene to hire an aide to be with her. The aide was there when she got home from the hospital to be introduced to Arlene, and everything seemed to be getting off to a good start. But later that night, one person from the church care team got a call from the aide. Arlene had forgotten that the aide was supposed to be there and she had locked herself in the bathroom because there was a 'stranger' in the house. The aide could not convince her to unlock the bathroom door, and she was concerned that Arlene was in such a frightened state, that she would wear herself out and might fall and hurt herself.

One from the care team went right over to the house and spoke to Arlene through the door, trying to convince her to unlock it. "It sounds like the voice of my friend," Arlene said, "but how can I know?" So the person told her that he would go outside where she could see him through the bathroom window, and then she would know she could unlock the door and come out. It was already dark, but the hope was that the interior bathroom light would illumine the friend's face. Unfortunately, the thirty seconds it took for the person to go outside and gently knock on the bathroom window was long enough for Arlene to forget that was the plan. Poor Arlene was even more frightened, because not only was there some 'stranger' in her house, but perhaps there was a peeping Tom just outside her window. It took a while, but finally Arlene got coaxed by that familiar trustworthy voice to unlock the bathroom door. At that moment, the relieved care team member wasn't so interested in having a shepherd's rod or staff, just a screw driver to immediately take off the latch that was on the bathroom door.

You and I, in our spiritual dementia, still have some kind of latch that we can use to try to keep our caring shepherding Lord locked out. We can get ourselves so

worked up, sometimes we are so frightened that we are likely to hurt ourselves and we particularly need to let our shepherd in. At times, our short-term or long-term memory loss seems to fail us as we act as if our Lord and shepherd has been less than reliable in providing for us and in guiding us in the past. There are times we think we should just stay put instead of going where our good shepherd leads. But when we follow the voice of our Lord Jesus as our shepherd, then we will come to recognize that surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life, and we can delight that we can live not just in our own little house, but in the house of the Lord our whole life long and even forevermore. Fellow sheep, let's not just avoid the wolves, coyotes, and foxes. As we come to recognize the voice of our Lord and shepherd, we can entrust ourselves to go where we are being led. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."