

## Hearing Voices

There once was a tourist who came too close to the edge of the Grand Canyon. As Darrin Fish tells the story, this tourist lost his footing and plunged over the side, clawing and scratching to save himself. He disappeared out of sight, but just before he fell into the open space, he stumbled onto a scrubby brush which he grabbed with both hands. The tourist was hanging on for his life, when he decided to call out to the heavens, ‘Is anyone up there?’

A calm powerful voice came out of the sky, “Yes, there is.”

‘Can you help me?’

‘Yes, I probably can. Do you believe?’

“Yes, I believe!”

“Do you have faith?”

“Yes, I have strong faith!”

“Well, in that case, simply let go of the bush and everything will turn out fine.”

(tense pause) “Is there anyone else up there?”

Ah, there is life’s problem in a nutshell. It’s not that we do not hear the voice that offers us hope and help. It’s that we do not trust the voice. Rather, we listen to our own voice, or we keep searching, hoping for other voices to respond, voices that we prefer, with guidance that makes us feel better.

We go astray when we respond to any voice other than the voice of our Good Shepherd.

**John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”**

Sheep need a shepherd. Jesus is not looking for the wisest, the smartest, the richest, the most popular folks for his flock. The most important quality to understand about sheep is that they will thrive when they follow the shepherd. But following his voice is a learned habit. Sheep prefer to go their own way, to wander off, thinking they know best the way to good pasture and streams of water.

Our best opportunity to find the joy of life happens though, not when we listen to our own voices or the voices of others, but when we listen to the voice of the good shepherd, the one who loves the flock so much that he is willing to and in fact does lay down his life for those stubborn sheep.

**v. 12a. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep.**

Hired hands are the negative voices, which I put in three categories. First, there are ‘selfish voices.’ These voices, originating from our pride, are quite popular in our culture. The selfish voice says, when it confronts a contrary voice, ‘Fine. I will pick up my bat and go home.’ We might also call this the ‘my way or the highway’ voice. If we don’t like the way the flock is behaving, we just say, ‘I

am out of here!’ If everyone won’t play by my rules, and let me win, then I am leaving the flock.

C.S. Lewis wrote writes that, ‘There are only two sorts of people in the world: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, ‘*Thy will be done.*’ Let’s you and I strive to be the people who say, ‘God, *thy will, not my will, be done.*’

Second, there are what I call ‘false voices.’ These voices are dangerous for us because they do not seek our own good, but rather to manipulate us through a range of techniques. False voices promise us that we will be better off if we listen, but really the only one better off is the maker of the false promises. These voices claim that happiness lies in building fences, keeping out the ‘other’ through false flags like race, nationality, social status, or gender.

Third, there are controlling voices, shaming us over our body types, or our intellect, or our lack of possessions. These harmful voices tell us that we won’t be truly satisfied with life until we let them lead us to pursue peace by becoming someone other than the beautiful persons God designed us to be.

The speakers of these negative voices, the hired hands: selfish, false, and controlling voices, do not seek to lay down their lives for anyone other than themselves. They seek the comfort and shelter of the hired hand, not the sheep.



So, instead of listening to the selfish, false, and controlling voices coming at us through every type of media outlet which exists, we need to get to know the one true voice of the Good Shepherd.

**v. 14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—**

Jesus knows us, and he has known us from before we were born. We were called to be the sheep of his flock before his finger formed the foundation of the earth. What’s more, the Good Shepherd’s sheep also know him because they recognize his voice. They learn that following his voice will lead them to green pastures, beside still waters, even through the shadow of the valley of death.

**v. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.**

The secret to knowing the pathway to life is to know the voice of the leader. Earlier in this same chapter, John records Jesus explaining that he came to lead out the Jewish people. This is what is meant by ‘his own’ in verse 4.

**v. 16a. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.**

But this is only a part of the flock. Jesus explains in verse 16 that his flock includes the whole world. We, being Gentiles, are the 'other sheep.' Jesus came for both Jew and Gentile, to bring them together into community and to lead that community of faithful sheep home.



**v. 16b They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.**

How do we learn to listen to the Good Shepherd's voice? Well, a good place to start is what we are doing here today: reading and exploring his assuring words. Then we pray on those words. Then we test our understanding by seeking the input of other wise Christians brothers and sisters.

If we engage in the process of Bible study, prayer, and small groups we learn how to distinguish the voice of Jesus from the selfish, false, and controlling voices. It is a process that takes a lifetime to learn.

John Calvin writes that, "we...are born lions, tigers, wolves and bears, until the Spirit of Christ tames us, and from wild and savage beasts forms us to be mild sheep...."

Yes, we may stray, and perhaps today you are worrying over some soul you may fear has strayed too far from the fold to even hear the voice of the Good

Shepherd. Take heart then in Calvin's observation that, "though they were tempted to go astray, they were kept in obedience to the pure faith...God again gathers the sheep which had wandered for a little...."



In this era of hyper-critical sentiments, when the church fights against itself and the world, when people fight against the call to dwell as one flock under one Shepherd, it is easy to get discouraged. As we are coming out of COVID and the disagreements which consume us as we debate reopening, as we hear threats of people leaving and rumors of people who will never return it is easy to throw up our arms and give up.

For myself, and I pray for our church, there is no giving up in our future. Our future hope depends upon us tuning out the selfish, false, and controlling voices and listening to Jesus alone. If we follow his voice only then we will find that our future hope is bright. But, even if it is not as bright as we might hope, Calvin offers this reassurance:

"But if the number of believers is smaller than might be desired, and if out of this small number a large proportion be continually dropping off (we receive consolation that) the elect of God, who are Christ's sheep listen to them....It is our duty to labor diligently, and to strive by every possible method, that the whole may be brought, if possible, into the unity of the faith; but let us in the meantime be well satisfied with belonging to the number."

**v. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.**

On this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of our Easter celebration, we remember that Jesus came not only to lay down his life for our sin, but so that he could take up his life again. And the promise of the Resurrection is new life, not just for Christ, but for all the flock who follow his voice.

Our call as a church is to then echo that call of the Good Shepherd, to follow his model of reaching out to and enfolding the lost and the hurting. Who are the sheep that we are called to offer genuine hospitality so that they can be a part of the one flock by learning to know the one voice of Jesus?

Our call is to be the echo chamber for Jesus' voice, not to decide who should respond to it. Trust Jesus to know the difference between those who are his sheep and those who are not. Knowing and being known is ultimately the work of the Spirit.

Let us commit to be a church with a voice follows the model of Jesus in offering:

- encouragement that people are worth a great deal to God; valued
- discipline, yes, but always in the context of love, not judgment
- welcome and hospitality, especially to those on the margins of society
- a persistent, insistent, present, still, small voice which calls people home

**Big Idea: The voice of Jesus is the only one that can lead us safely home.**

When you are hanging on to the last branch that keeps you from falling down into the abyss, it is really hard to hear to the voice of the Good Shepherd. It takes courage, yes. It takes faith, yes. But do you know what it takes mostly? Trust. Trust.

Let us strive to become sheep transformed and transforming as we grow in our trust of the voice which invites us to let go of the thin branches so that we can fall into the arms of the Shepherd, who is always holding out his strong, loving arms to rescue us and to bring us safely home.

Amen.

