

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**The Fourth Sunday in Easter – Good Shepherd Sunday, May 3, 2020**  
**John 10:1-10**

*Holy and all loving God, yours is the voice that has called to your beloved creation through all time and which we all long to hear: help us to hear when you call and to follow your voice along the paths of transformation that lead us to new and resurrected life. All this we ask through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd and our Lord. Amen.*

So, it turns out that the uterus isn't exactly the quietest place to hang out. Not only can a baby hear the sounds of his mom's body—her stomach growling, her heart beating, the occasional hiccup—but he can also hear noises from beyond. If mom sits in a movie theater with state-of-the-art sound or walks by a noisy construction site, odds are the fetus will react to all the commotion by kicking or shifting around.

Of course, not all sounds are the same. Perhaps the most significant one a baby hears in utero is her mother's voice. Studies show that by the time babies are born, they can recognize their mother's voice. In one study, doctors gave day-old infants pacifiers that were connected to tape recorders. Depending on the babies' sucking patterns, the pacifiers either turned on a recording of their mother's voice or that of an unfamiliar woman's voice. The amazing result: within 10 to 20 minutes, the babies learned to adjust their sucking rate on the pacifier to turn on their own mother's voice. Studies have also shown that a mother's voice will also release oxytocin in the child, the bonding or so-called "love" hormone. One study even suggests that a mother's voice might even be able to pierce through the fog of a coma.

And it seems that babies not only prefer to hear their own mother's voice but also develop a keen ear for it. Everyone knows about "mother voice", right? You know... that particular voice, that certain tone and pitch if you will, that can pierce through all the noise and racket, and be heard by your particular child. That always amazes me.

A favorite place for my family to go when our daughter, Emma, was really young was a place in Austin called Central Market. The outdoor patio and yard provided the best of both worlds: good food and drink for the adults, an awesome playground for the kids, and great free live music that was fun for all. By the time Emma was 5 years old, she was an expert on that playground – she knew everything about it. So, we started to let her play there without our hovering and watching over every move she made. Such delicious freedom!

Eventually, however, it would be time to go. We would walk down to the playground and, from the sidelines, search through the messy scrum of kids, looking for her copper-colored hair. Once found, I would call out for her using my "mother voice". Her father could call out, "Emma, honey, it's time to go" until the cows came home, but one carefully barked "Emma!" in mother voice, her head would immediately turn to me. Then all I needed to do was to wave her over. No matter how loud and busy the kid crowds were, no matter how many other parents were yelling to their children, Emma always heard me when I used my mother voice. Now, she didn't always obediently follow when I called, but because I knew her and she knew my voice, she was able to hear my call.

In our lesson today, Jesus is in Jerusalem yet again arguing with the Pharisees. He's had a number of escalating run-ins with them and chapter 10 of John's gospel responds to these events and propels the gospel narrative forward with declarative descriptions of Jesus as both the Good Shepherd and "gate" by whom the sheep will be led to the pasture of abundant life.

To the Pharisees, Jesus draws sharp contrast between the true shepherd and the "thieves" and "bandits" who harm the sheep. With this, he describes the true shepherd as one whom the gatekeeper knows by sight and opens the gate, and one whom the sheep also recognize by hearing

his voice calling to them. In John's scene, the sheep recognize the true shepherd by his voice and follow where he leads them to pasture.

In the following verses in this chapter, Jesus goes even further to elaborate on this imagery of the Good Shepherd: the Good Shepherd is the one who lays down his life for his sheep – the Good Shepherd is the one who does not run away when the wolf comes and cares for his sheep – the Good Shepherd is the one who seeks after the sheep who do not yet belong to his fold and brings them in. All of this seems to have something to do with "knowing". Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father....and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." In this imagery, it seems that knowing leads to listening, which then leads to belonging and following. Another way of saying this is, because the sheep are known by Jesus they hear Jesus' voice, follow him, and live new lives. Jesus' flock, his people, are the ones who hear, follow, and live.

Let's look at this a bit more closely. First, Jesus' sheep are the ones who hear his call. Because Jesus is the Good Shepherd, he knows his sheep. He knows us before we know him, even before we can hear him. Because we are known by him, Jesus will call to us in a voice that we can hear. In this way, he seeks us out. Whether or not we listen is our choice, but should we choose to, we will hear his call. And when we hear his call, we then know ourselves to be known by God and claimed as his beloved. We then know to whom we belong and from whom we receive love and life.

Second, Jesus' sheep are the ones who follow him. When we do hear the Good Shepherd's call, we hear his command that always accompanies the love: "Follow me." We are given the courage to follow because we know ourselves to have been sought by God, and in our following, we are transformed. What this following is like may be best described in the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.  
He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.*

In following Jesus, we may trust that he will give us what we need and guide us – he will refresh us and revive our souls, and we will be made new. And in the reviving of our souls, we have no need to fear, even when we are led through a dangerous and foreboding landscape. The psalmist continues:

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;  
you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.  
Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

In our following, we are protected – not from the harsh realities of embodied and mortal life, but from the destruction of life that comes from fear. Even in the midst of death and enemies, the Good Shepherd nourishes and comforts us. He anoints us as his very own and our cup overflows with his love and grace, so that we may dwell in his house for ever.

And third, Jesus's sheep are the ones who are given eternal life. Through our following, we will experience and know the Good Shepherd in such a way as to be transformed into his likeness and share in his life. As he lives in the Father and the Father lives in him, we too may share in this eternal life. This is not life found in some other time and place – we need not leave our geography to travel to a distant land. This life may be found and inhabited here and now. And as we dwell in the Lord's house, we manifest this eternal life within ourselves, leading lives that give glory to God and help bring about new life in others. This is the life promised us when we hear the Good Shepherd's call and follow him.

Another way of putting this life of discipleship is just this:

We hear because we are known.

We follow because we have been sought.

We live because we have been transformed by God's love.

Amen.