

John 10:1-15

“The Voice of Love”

During the season of Lent, we, like Jesus basically turn our faces toward Jerusalem and the cross. If you read any kind of personal devotion during Lent, then your readings no doubt have been following the last weeks of Jesus life. If you regularly attend worship, the sermon, prayers and even music are more solemn, more stoic and more staid because they are meant to help us walk with Christ up the hill of Calvary. Carrying the cross with Jesus, so to speak.

And this is how it should be. Easter, that is to say the resurrection of Christ, is the definitive moment of the Christian faith. And during Lent, we speak often of the fact that Jesus died for us. And that Jesus conquered death and rose for us. And so we should. But I mentioned on Ash Wednesday that sometimes I fear that we dwell so much in the reality that Jesus died for us that we forget that Jesus LIVED for us too. Until we come to this passage in John.

In the “I am” statements, found in the Gospel of John, Jesus makes eight explicit, self-revelatory comments about who he is. In the cultural context of his day, these comments would have had a much more *obvious* meaning to and impact on their hearers than may be apparent for us. Yet, over two thousand years later, these statements remain powerful, and provocative. And two are found in the passage we just heard.

The first one, “I am the gate” deals with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed we are basically told that Jesus is the path, the opening, into Eternal life. That by his death, a way to eternal life has been opened to us. But the latter statement, “I am the good shepherd” deals more

with the way that Jesus lived for us and I would like us to focus our attention on that statement today.

Many of the images that are used to describe the promised Messiah in the Old Testament bring forth the idea of a mighty King, a political ruler who will free the oppressed Israelites from centuries of slavery in one form or another. But wedged in between these passages, the hope of a good shepherd can be found. In Isaiah we are told that the Messiah will “gather the lambs in his arms” and “gently lead those that are young”. And while the idea of the Messiah as the white knight on a steed with a sword of righteousness is just what we need when we read the daily news, I think that the Good Shepherd is what we want as we cradle a newborn babe or a dying loved one in our arms. So let’s look at that one.

Well, on second thought, let’s look at the sheep first. Do you know why there are so many images of God’s people being compared to sheep in the Bible? Because sheep are not very bright. And they need a lot of care. Did your mother ever say to you, “I don’t CARE if Johnny gets to stay out until midnight. Do you have to do EVERYTHING Johnny does? If Johnny jumped off a cliff, would you jump off after him?” Well, your mother got that phrase from a mother sheep.

You see, a sheep really will jump off a cliff if the one in front of it does. It will drink contaminated water and plow forward into a thicket of thorns and eat poisonous plants, if the sheep next to it does as well. In other words, sheep are DUMB and they are a HIGH MAINTENANCE lot. And so are we! And that is why we need a good shepherd.

So what qualities of the good shepherd does Jesus provide for us? Well, first we know that although our Creator is mighty enough to have made the whole universe and everything in it and to have made each of us in God’s image, even still as our Good Shepherd he is so intimate

with us that he calls us each by name. Jesus reminds us in this passage that the sheep know the voice of the shepherd. In both ancient and modern days, shepherds often tend their flocks together. And when it is time to sleep, they come together against the wall of a canyon or the opening of a cave for safety. The shepherds would then lie down beside each other across the opening because sheep won't step over a human. But by morning, all the flocks will have mingled together, appearing to be one big flock.

This is not a problem for the good shepherd. Because his flock knows the sound of his voice. So as each shepherd rises and calls his flock by name, the sheep separate into the proper herds, following their own master.

But for us to know the sound of OUR shepherd's voice, we have to be familiar with his words. We have to understand the spirit of his teachings and know the intent of his parables and miracles. And we do this by becoming familiar with those words, those teachings of Christ. The WORD, the Scripture, teaches us to recognize the Living word – Jesus Christ. And to know God's will for us as the ones who belong to God's own flock.

Of course, one of the most powerful images of God as our shepherd is found in David's beautiful 23rd Psalm. And reread it this week, I found myself drawn to one specific line of that Psalm, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures." That is because when I am overworked or unnecessarily worried, I will push myself and push myself until God pulls the rug out from under me and I end up on the couch with a cup of hot tea. In other words, when I get too much on my plate and won't loosen my Superwoman cape on my own, I end up sick and am forced to lie down. Has that ever happened to any of you? And this is another similarity that people and sheep share.

According to Philip Keller, an honest to goodness shepherd and author, sheep will not lie down unless four requirements have been met. First, because they are so timid, sheep will refuse to lie down unless they are free from all fear. Second, because they are always part of a flock, they will not lie down when there is friction in the flock of any kind. Third, if they are tormented by any kind of pests, they literally cannot relax. And lastly, they will not lie down if they are hungry.

Now most of us do not have a problem with hunger. We are well fed, in fact overfed, if I may say so myself. I believe strongly in partaking in the four basic food groups whenever I can – potatoes, cheese, chocolate and ice cream. And while we are working on personal changes during Lent I may just preach a sermon on the sin of gluttony! Well probably not!

But the first three on that list are the exact things that keep me up at night. Fear. Disagreement. Worries. And friends, usually these worries are about things that I have absolutely no control over. And this is why the Good Shepherd literally spends his night among the flock, watching over them and reassuring them of his presence.

I am a grandmother and it is a job I highly recommend! Hayden spent the night with us one night this week and, even at two, he will let me rock him a little before he goes to bed. I love feeling his soft head against me as he drifts into that state of pure dependence, knowing that I will not let anything happen to him while I am there. And that is the same feeling that God wants us to have when we rest in his presence. There is nothing like the Spirit of Christ surrounding us to dispel fear, to keep panic at bay, to shed light on a picture that is totally dark.

That is also why our God was not content to be a God who created us and then left us and watched us from afar. God wanted to experience all of life for us and with us. So when we rejoice we know that God rejoices and when we weep we know that God weeps too!

There is a well circulated story about a little boy who could not sleep one night and asked his mom to stay in the room with him. She tried everything to reassure him but finally her patience ran thin and she said, "I am leaving and you will be fine. If you are afraid, just remember that God is always with you." To which he replied, "I know that, but tonight I need a God with skin on." Our Creator knew that we needed a God with skin on so he sent Jesus Christ to live for us.

Which leads to the most important role of the Good Shepherd. You see, a good shepherd never leads his flock anywhere that he has not already been himself. The shepherd goes through a pasture before his sheep, digging up poisonous plants that they don't have the sense not to eat. Picking up rocks that will cause them to turn their ankles. Clearing away brambles that will tear their skin and killing parasites that will sicken them. Any other words, the shepherd makes our pasture a completely safe place to live in.

And so when we experience disagreement within our family, Jesus can tell us how it felt when his own brothers and sisters tried to run him off a cliff after he preached his first sermon in his hometown. When we lose a loved one, Christ reminds us that he wept when his friend Lazarus died and he saw the sorrow of those who loved him. When we cannot make a decision and every path seems to have a dangerous crook in it, we remember Christ praying to his Father, "Not my will but Thine be done" and we know that sometimes we can only trust and believe. Because the Good Shepherd lived for us all. And when He cannot make our pasture safe, because we live in a fallen world, we **STILL** have the assurance of his presence.

Because the Good News is that he lives for us still. Even though we cannot experience him in the flesh as his disciples did when he was on earth, Jesus is still with us in that every day

through the power of the Holy Spirit. And his Spirit gives us the wisdom and strength and power to do things that we could never do without it.

When I became a minister at the age of 40, I felt like I finally knew why God made me! But just because I love being a pastor, that doesn't mean that it is always easy. Especially when I am called to officiate at the funeral for someone for someone I REALLY love.

We had a nurse at Presbyterian Community who was just the right mixture of tough love and compassion – a perfect nurse. She was also a Baptist minister's wife and quickly became the one that I turned to when I needed a chaplain myself. Often, before I would have to lead a funeral I would be so nervous and scared and I would go in and say to Jean, "I just can't do it. I know I will cry." She would say, "Well you don't think you're going in there by yourself do you. Of course you can do it because God is with you – now go on. And I'm praying for you." Jean's faith in me and her prayers always got me through.

And afterward, she would tell me what a good job and I had done and say, "You know you are going to do my funeral one day." Of course, I thought she was just trying to boost my confidence. Her husband was a pastor after all, and a Baptist and I was sure that that would not go over in his church. Ultimately, Jean retired and we kept in touch a few times of year but no one has ever taken her place in my heart.

A couple of years ago, I was at a preaching conference in Nashville, running late for our morning worship and hurrying down the street when my cell phone rang. It was Jean's husband calling to tell me that she had died. I was devastated. As I tried to think of something pastoral to say to him, he said, "You know Jean always wanted you to do her funeral." And after some protests, I agreed and told him I would call when I got back to town.

But then I just couldn't go into worship. I sat on a bench outside the Frist Baptist Church in Nashville and cried and said, "Lord, there is no way I can get through this." And wondered what I would do. Ultimately, I composed myself to go in and join the others in worship. And as I opened the doors of the church where 2000 ministers were worshipping, I heard them singing this powerful message: "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll. Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul."

And I knew Jean was in Heaven saying, "You don't think you're going in there by yourself do you?" And the Jesus who lives for me was doing for me what I could not do for myself.

So when we get to the empty tomb this year, I know that we will rejoice that we are Easter people and that our Messiah died for us and rose for us. But it is my prayer that, as we continue our journey through Lent, we will also rejoice that our Good Shepherd lived for us and lives for us still. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.