

John 10:22-30

22 The time came for the Festival of Dedication[a] in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was in the temple, walking in the covered porch named for Solomon. 24 The Jewish opposition circled around him and asked, "How long will you test our patience? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

25 Jesus answered, "I have told you, but you don't believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, 26 but you don't believe because you don't belong to my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life. They will never die, and no one will snatch them from my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them from my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

It's an odd juxtaposition, at first, to utilize Psalm 23 in the Easter season. Even as we hear this Psalm speak about new life, so often we're used to this psalm's presence at funerals. Though the psalm itself isn't about death, they seem somewhat tied together, the anxiety of grief tied up with the joy of new life, most likely because it is at times of death that we need the promise of life most of all. Make no mistake, this is a true juxtaposition. As we said last week, resurrection assumes death came first. At another level, though, Psalm 23 belongs in much more of our lives than just our memorial services. Why? Because a shepherd lives every day with the sheep.

Life in the resurrection is the life of a sheep. Much like sheep, we know what we think we want, and sometimes we're right. At other times, though, we wander aimlessly down a path, and again like sheep, in those times what we need is a shepherd who guides us back on the paths of resurrection. What do I mean by this?

Well, let's put it this way. Sheep love two things: good community, and good food. At the core of a sheep's identity is to want to be with other sheep. In the great wide world, where lions and wolves might make you lunch, it's safer to be with a group, watching out for one another. In the center of their being, sheep know that we do life better together.

At the same time, sheep become incredibly single-minded when it comes to a good meal. A good salad of green grass, waxy leaves, and yellow dandelion heads proves so irresistible to sheep that they sometimes keep their heads down munching for hours at a time, with their eyes just high enough to see a few feet in front of them,

looking where the next best salad bar might appear before them. This at first appears like nothing more than sheer intelligence. Creatures need to eat, so let's not miss an opportunity for an easy meal.

Then problem, though, is that with their heads down, these sheep can wander away from the community that they not only want, but that they so desperately need. When this happens, they leave their flock and their shepherd miles behind, especially if the group takes off in another direction. It's tendencies like this that lead to the parable of the lost sheep, because, well, sheep can get lost pretty easily this way, especially in desert environments where food sources often seem scarce. Too much focus on a short term good leads to long term problems.

Perhaps we're more like sheep than we'd like to admit at times. We often know what's good for us, and we know that our communities often help us to see these goods more clearly. We know that telling the truth is better than lying, that exercising is better than hours in front of a television, that more time in prayer and scripture is better than more time following YouTube rabbit holes and Facebook fights, that creating beautiful art is better than seeking pain or destruction. And sometimes, even much of the time, we stick with one another, and like sheep, watch out for one another, supporting one another in these attempts to live abundant life, to live resurrected life, rather than doing the things that lead to isolation or death.

But of course, we know ourselves well enough to know that we too become single minded about things in life, even good things. Have you ever had a discussion with someone and were so determined that you were right that you didn't care about how badly you treated them? Or have you ever gotten so wrapped up in completing a job that you forgot to pickup the kids? We can get so focused on doing something,

saying something, getting something, that we put blinders on ourselves, and this little bit of good that we're trying to do ends up leading us far afield from where we should be, with God and with our community. We need a good shepherd not just to protect us from the wolves and the lions, but to guide us toward paths of resurrection life.

When we hear Psalm 23 in this light, it can start to make much more sense for our daily lives. We need the Good Shepherd in our lives, not just one day to bring us into heaven, but everyday to keep us walking in eternal life. The point of resurrection isn't just some far off goal, but a way of living here and now, and we, like sheep, need a good shepherd to keep us in the path of righteousness, to help us on the ways of everlasting life, and to bring us back when we wander away, even for seemingly good things.

Psalm 23 talks about comfort coming from the rod and the staff of the shepherd. For anyone who's seen a shepherd in action, this might seem odd, because the rod and staff are aggressive tools. A rod is a long, straight stick used for discipline and defense. If wolves attacked, the rod came out as a way to defend the flock. I imagine this looked kind of like Donatello defending the rest of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles from Shredder's armies with his kendo sticks. But the rod was also used to keep the sheep together. If one began to go astray, then the rod would hit the hind quarters as a guide to turn back in toward the group. If the sheep began to fight, the rod would serve as discipline and remind all that we belong together, that we thrive when we support one another.

The staff is what we would call a shepherd's crook, a long stick with a hooked end. This served an additional purpose for safety. As sheep searched for the best patch of sweet grass, they'd sometimes end up in precarious positions and in danger of falling.

You'd reach out with the staff, or the crook, and hook them by their necks back up to safety. I imagine this looks like pulling a bad comedian off stage before they embarrass themselves any further.

These are aggressive tools, and the Psalmist says they bring comfort to him? Yes! These are the tools of life, guiding us into the green pastures, still waters, to the places our souls are restored. Jesus is aggressive in bringing us into resurrection, in restoring abundant life into our lives. That's comforting, even though we know there might be pain involved. Sure, getting yanked by the neck with a staff doesn't sound comfortable, but it's sure better than falling off of a cliff! Jesus doesn't seek to inflict pain, but to restore us to our community, to revive that resurrected life within us.

But these aren't the only tools in our Good Shepherd's kit. We also hear in John's Gospel that the sheep know the voice of the good shepherd. Because shepherds spent every day with the sheep, they became incredibly close, much like pets. Many of you could come over and call my dogs by name, but they wouldn't know your voice. But if Michelle calls them, even more than my voice, you better believe that they know who is speaking because of how much time she spends with them and how much care we offer them. Similarly, I've been in a room full of parents and kids when we heard a child's cry and none but that child's parents moved, because they knew the voice of their beloved boy. The voice, it seems, is the most powerful tool that a shepherd can use.

We need our Good Shepherd to live this resurrection life. We need the rod to protect us from predators and the staff to protect us from ourselves. Most of all, though, we need the voice of God to speak us into resurrection. This voice of God is the same voice that spoke a word over the chaos of creation and miraculously brought forth life.

This voice is the same voice that called Abraham to leave Ur and find a promised land, the same voice that spoke an everlasting promise to Ezekiel through the sound of sheer silence, the same voice that inspired the faithfulness of a Gentile woman named Ruth and promised blessing to a pregnant teenager named Mary. This is the voice that creates, surprises, challenges, inspires, and resurrects across time and space. This is our Good Shepherd, who's been at work throughout human history and even before history began. That voice is powerful. That voice is compassionate. When that voice speaks, resurrection is there. We need that voice in our lives, the voice of our shepherd who guides us along the paths of life abundant.

So where do we find that voice in our lives? Where does God speak to us the words that we so deeply need to hear? It begins with prayer and meditation. When we pray, we submit our words to God, and when we meditate, we open ourselves to God's responses, God's words spoken through images or silence, through mountain landscapes and babbling brooks. To avoid prayer and meditation is to avoid conversation with our beloved, to ignore the presence of our Good Shepherd. As the old hymn says, "God speaks to me everywhere," but to hear that, we must put ourselves in a position to hear that voice. Prayer and meditation position our ears to God's voice in the world today.

Just as we listen for those new words that God's speaking, to find that ever-active voice in the world, we also have witnesses of God's voice throughout history. Reading scripture and engaging the traditions of our faith over the past few thousand years help to show us what God's voice sounds like. There's a rich record of God's compassionate, merciful, just voice in the Bible that helps us listen to God when we can't seem to hear God speak in our own lives. We can also see through the writings of

people like Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, St. Teresa of Avila, Nelson Mandela, and a host of others who've written about their walks of faith and about how God spoke to them in times of need, joy, sorrow, and anticipation. We can hear God's voice through these witnesses of the past.

But these aren't the only people who might become God's voice for us. Our community, the people with us and around us, may also speak God's words to us. As each of us bears God's image, each of us can become God's voice for one another. We find this true as we worship God with one another, as we serve the New River Valley with one another, as we seek counseling and wisdom from one another, as we confess our sins and seek forgiveness with one another. We are the Body of Christ, and in this resurrection life, we're called to speak the words of the Good Shepherd into the lives of others. We're called to live and serve in newness of life, through Jesus Christ our Shepherd, and we're called to reflect that shepherd, to share the words of grace, to speak the truth of love into all.

That's where the analogy of sheep breaks down. Sheep are meant to follow the shepherd, just as we're meant to follow Christ, but sheep never become like the shepherd. We are called to become like Christ. We need God's words to guide us in the resurrection so that we become like Christ, so that we too speak God's words to others. We're called to become a sort of centrifuge of God's voice, spinning in what we hear from God and spinning it out to others. We need God's voice, not just in our ears, but in our mouths as well. That's the kind of shepherding we need as we grow in abundant life, the kind that speaks life into being. Amen.