

Acts 2

42 The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. 43 A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. 44 All the believers were united and shared everything. 45 They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. 46 Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. 47 They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
3 he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

1 Peter 2

19 Now, it is commendable if, because of one's understanding of God, someone should endure pain through suffering unjustly. 20 But what praise comes from enduring patiently when you have sinned and are beaten for it? But if you endure steadfastly when you've done good and suffer for it, this is commendable before God.

21 You were called to this kind of endurance, because Christ suffered on your behalf. He left you an example so that you might follow in his footsteps. 22 He committed no sin, nor did he ever speak in ways meant to deceive. 23 When he was insulted, he did not reply with insults. When he suffered, he did not threaten revenge. Instead, he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24 He carried in his own body on the cross the sins we committed. He did this so that we might live in righteousness, having nothing to do with sin. By his wounds you were

healed. 25 Though you were like straying sheep, you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your lives.

John 10

1 I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. 2 The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. 5 They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice." 6 Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying.

7 So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. 8 All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.
Amen.

Ah, the sheep. Those woolly bullies of the pasture have gotten a bad rap in our churches. In common parlance, you'll hear people refer to sheep as dumb, simple beasts. That's why you'll hear social critics refer to groups of people blindly following a corrupt leader as sheep, or my personal favorite, sheeple, a phrase often heard on the lips of conspiracy theorists,. An impressive number of sermons have cast sheep as mindless wanderers, as helpless creatures, as though sheep didn't exist prior to the rise of the shepherd's occupation. Yet, even the biblical images of sheep contradict such notions.

We might be tempted to quote Matthew 9, where Jesus implies that sheep without a shepherd are "troubled" and

“helpless.” Yet, that doesn't they're stupid. It means they're better off in relationship with a shepherd. It means their success depends on the presence of a good shepherd, a skilled leader that cares for their well being. We could say the very same thing of humanity. Our flourishing depends upon not just our own skills, but on the presence and practice of leaders that help us become more fully ourselves. That's true as a town, a state, a country, a family, a church. Now, of course there's very different models of leadership that work well, but the point remains: benefitting from good leadership isn't dumb, but the natural state of healthy relationships.

Relationship is key to understanding the dynamic between sheep and shepherd. Shepherds spent days on end with the sheep, leading the flock to green pastures so they might eat their fill, guiding them to still waters so they might quench their thirst. It's a constant journey from pasture to water and back again.

Sheep come to know their shepherd not as separate from the flock, but as the one who leads from the center. The voice of the shepherd becomes a trusted tone because, right after its mother's bleat, the shepherd's voice is the first sound a sheep hears after birth. It's that voice that beckons toward new food sources or warns away from the wolves that roam the land. For this relationship to develop, for the sheep not just to know, but to trust, the shepherd's voice, they spend significant time together.

But have you ever seen a sheep shearing? These are the kinds of things common to county and state fairs in my rural Ohio home, so I've spent a good bit of time witnessing such events. I've seen the same in Ireland, a land known for its hearty sheep that roam the countryside. One of the most impressive things about these events across the world is that, when the sheep's shepherd does the shearing, there's a mutuality between them. The shepherd needs the wool, and the sheep also needs to shed

it. In fact, unsheared sheep are in danger both of being slowed down for predators and ill because of the stress caused by the massive weight of the wool. There's an interplay as it happens, with the sheep offering itself to the shepherd, laying down, turning its body and even rolling over to expose the areas that need attention from the shears. If the sheep becomes anxious, shepherd offers reassurance with a steady hand and a calm coo from that ever-present voice. In these moments, it's not just time in the presence of one another, but it's time communicating with one another.

How much time do you spend communicating with God? Now, I'm the first to argue that God's present everywhere, that God is constantly with us even when we don't recognize that divine activity in our midst. So, yes, we're always with God. But I'm talking about how often you're aware of God's presence, about how much time you're intentionally looking for God in the

world, how much time you speak and listen for God's voice. How often do we make the time to turn our focus away from the trillions of pieces of sensory data demanding our attention and instead turn our entire focus to the one who gave us senses in the first place?

Numbers on this can be confusing. Pew Research suggests that just over half of you pray every day, and that 84% have prayed in the last week. Well done! Yet, if we look at the church, people just don't seem to know what God's voice sounds like. If we're supposed to be sheep of Jesus's flock, why do we constantly seem to wander away from his call to justice for the oppressed, gifts to the poor, food for the hungry, compassion for the outcast, healing for the sick, and equal integrity for all people? Why, rather than confidently roaming as sheep of the Good Shepherd, do we fight with one another, full of anxiety? Consider this: of all those people that pray, the average amount of time

spent in prayer daily is one minute. The average amount of time we spend focused on developing our relationship with our shepherd is one minute out of the 1440 minutes we live each day. How many other voices do we hear?

There's a fabled story of Luther's prayer life that he'd spend the first hour of every day in prayer, but if the next day's calendar was full, he'd arise early to spend twice or three times that amount of time in prayer. That might sound impossible when compared with our busy schedules, to spend as many as 180 minutes in prayer. But think again of the sheep. They know the shepherd's voice because the majority of their lives is spent in the presence of the shepherd. Now, of course sheep aren't constantly talking to the shepherd, so we can't expect nonstop dialogue with God. That's not the point. But they've spent enough time interpersonal time - feeding and cleaning and shearing - that they come to intimately know the shepherd's voice. That way, when

they begin to wander from the flock or when a thief tries to sneak into the pen, one clarion call from the shepherd's voice reorients their entire lives toward life to the fullest. That's more like Luther's model, who knew that the demands of life in God's kingdom required investment in prayer, we too need to invest ourselves more deeply in prayer. But how do we begin?

The same way we eat an elephant: one bite at a time. No one expects you to go from a few quick second before a meal to spending an hour or more in deep prayer each day. What you need is to find a way to start that stretches beyond your current prayer habits in achievable ways, that helps to slowly grow your prayer life. And since we're talking about learning God's voice, we need to focus first on God's identity - to identify who God is - before we attend to our needs or hopes.

Let's explore meditation together then, since meditation is a deep, prayerful reflection on who God is. To meditate, you need

just a few things: peace, time, mantra, and movement. **Peace**, in this case, means shutting out the distractions that so often vie for our attention. That's why many people close their eyes or choose something like an icon to focus their attention. In our present day, this also means putting your phone on "do not disturb" and choosing wisely when to meditate, perhaps first thing in the morning before we start the day's obligations.

Time means that we can't appropriately meditate in a minute. We need to devote the kind of time that a sheep spends with a shepherd to the process of meditation. Just like any relationship, the more time we invest, the more we can discover about the one that we're with. Now, an hour is a long time to try, especially for our postmodern attention spans, so I'd suggest starting with a few minutes, three to five, and increasing every day by thirty seconds.

Mantras are focus statements of belief or desire that guide meditation. As Christians, a best practice is to draw them from our Scriptures or the creeds. Our readings this week offer us many possibilities, including *God is my shepherd, Jesus offers life to the fullest, and by your wounds we are healed*. Now, repeating the same thought over and over again might sound tedious, so that's where the last part of meditation comes in: **movement**.

Using movement looks like many things. It begins with simply taking deep breaths, to help calm the body and enrich your mind with oxygen. It can also involve things like prayer beads, used by many faith traditions but perhaps most recognizable in the Catholic rosary, which provide a simple movement of fingers to mark how many times you've prayed your particular prayer or a particular portion. Others choose to just use their body. For instance, if we were to pray, "God is my shepherd," we could mark that on our fingers, touching your thumb to a different finger

every time you say the mantra. Yoga is a form of meditation that utilizes your full body, from breath to stretching to full body movement, which is why Mims, our yogi, begins and ends with a mantra to help guide the holistic practice.

The goal of this kind of prayer is to come to a deeper awareness of God, an engagement with the divine that helps us to understand God's voice more clearly. It deepens our relationship. And make no mistake, our interaction with God is a relationship. Remember that God, as our Good Shepherd, wants to be with us. Sheep have something to give the shepherd, namely wool and milk. The shepherd could live without those things, but the shepherd's life is made better by the presence of the sheep. The sheep serve a purpose by bringing comfort and joy to their shepherd. We, too, as the sheep of God's pasture, bring joy to God, for as God's creations and God's images, God desires to be with us, to share with us the fullness of abundant

life, and that begins with a voice that calls us into Kingdom life. By entering into a deeper prayer life with God, we come to know God's voice as a voice that delights in our presence, as a voice that's constantly with us not out of necessity, but out of desire. God's chosen to be our shepherd, not only to protect us, but to rejoice in living abundant life alongside us.

So let's give meditation a try together. We'll just do two minutes, twice as long as the average American prayer. We'll use this mantra, *God is my shepherd*. I invite you to focus on the icon, the stained glass, or close your eyes, whichever you find most conducive to helping you focus. We'll enter by saying the mantra together, then find a time of silence to let God's identity as our shepherd to marinate in our minds, then close with the same mantra. Don't become discouraged if your mind wanders. Just acknowledge that and move back to the mantra silently in your mind. Allow your mind to follow anything that relates to

shepherds, sheep and our faith, trusting that your shepherd's communicating with you.

Feet on Floor

Deep Breath

"God is my Shepherd Mantra" Ten Times

Questions to Guide Meditation (Where's the Shepherd leading you? What needs shorn from your life to lighten your load?)

Silence

"God is my Shepherd Mantra" Ten Times

Amen.