

Jesus speaks to us, knows us and guides us
(and calls us to listen to him, to know and believe in him, and to follow him)
Sermon preached at The Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, April 17, 2016
The Fourth Sunday of Easter: Psalm 23, John 10:22-30

Psalm 23 (from the Book of Common Prayer):

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 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.

John 10:22-30 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

Today in the church calendar is commonly known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year about this time in Easter Season, we hear lessons from Holy Scripture that use the image of the Shepherd to remind us and teach us about our relationship with Jesus and who Jesus is in our lives. We learn more about who Jesus is as our shepherd and who we are as his sheep.

Psalm 23 is so well known for its image of the Lord as our Shepherd and of God's guidance and comfort even in the valley of the shadow of death and in the face of our enemies. We read in Revelation of the vision of the throne room of God where the saints, robed in white, sing God's praises, having made it through the great ordeal. And Jesus challenges the crowds in the temple to listen more closely, to believe in him and to follow him as sheep follow their shepherd.

Being a disciple of Jesus is more than just being like sheep to a shepherd, but we learn a lot about growing as disciples of Jesus Christ through thinking about the relationship between sheep and shepherd. The sheep need the shepherd. The shepherd guides the sheep to find food and water and places to rest in safety, keeping away predators. Jesus, of course, takes the metaphor farther, saying that he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. This is no ordinary shepherd. This is Jesus, who speaks to us, who knows us, and who guides us into blessing.

One of the first things that we learn about being a disciple of Jesus is that Jesus speaks to us, and calls us to listen to him. The crowds in the temple urge him to declare himself openly to be the Messiah. But Jesus says “I have already told you and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice.” Jesus is in the midst of his preaching and teaching ministry. He heals the sick and delivers those oppressed by evil; he forgives and offers the promise of new life and speaks about himself and God the Father. But many of those who listen are still looking for a political Messiah, or they have specific ideas about what a messiah should do for them, especially in establishing Jewish independence from the Roman Empire.

So Jesus is speaking, but many aren’t truly listening. One of the most important things that we can do as Jesus’ disciples is to listen to him. We hear the constant chatter of ourselves, our culture, and opinions from countless people around us. But do we listen to Jesus? In those moments when we pray, is our conscience formed well enough to recognize Jesus’ voice? We listen to Jesus by regularly reading and studying scripture. While individual reading and study is important, we learn so much more by reading and studying the Bible together. We learn from the reading and studying of those who have gone before us, those who are also listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd. Together we form and shape our conscience to recognize Jesus’ voice. And together, we seek and find God at work in our lives, recognizing the voice and actions of the Good Shepherd.

This is a gift given to all Christians—to help each other listen to God’s voice. Some people have unique gifts and skills in this regard, and they serve as examples for us and as mentors for us of how to listen to Jesus’ voice. In this parish, we call and train people with gifts like these as Stephen Ministers. Today, we commission a new class of Stephen Ministers for their work in this parish. Stephen Ministry is a ministry of trained volunteers who walk alongside someone facing a difficulty in life. Their chief ministry is one of listening and caring. They listen to their care receiver and they listen for what God is doing in his or her life.

There are others who direct or advise: lawyers who help with legal problems, accountants and financial advisers who help with financial problems, physicians and therapists who direct us in our physical and emotional health, clergy who can advise us on our spiritual health. But Stephen Ministers are not there to direct or advise. Rather they are there to listen and to care through confidential conversations and prayer. Stephen Ministers are particularly gifted in this aspect of discipleship: listening and helping us listen to Jesus.

Jesus speaks to us and calls us to listen to him. Jesus also knows us and calls us to know him and believe in him. When we seek God in prayer, we need to know how to recognize his voice and tell the difference between the voice of the Good Shepherd and the voice of our own desires or fears, or the voice of our culture or the voice of various imposters of God. The Gospel according to John especially highlights Jesus’ call to more than listening—Jesus wants us to *know* him as he knows us, and to *believe* in him.

Jesus spoke to the crowds, yet they did not hear or believe in him. Knowing and believing in Jesus helps us to rest on what we know to be true, rather than what is popular or fashionable or

what seems pleasing to us at the time, rather than what is timeless and real for the long term. So knowing and believing in Jesus is important. Belief in Jesus is not simply intellectual assent. Belief in Jesus is about faith and trust. Faith and trust require more than intellectual assent. To walk closely with God takes faith and trust in God—trust enough to be vulnerable, trust enough to follow God even when you don't completely understand.

Stephen Ministers are an example for us here as well. They help us to hear God and also to trust God—to reinforce and reassure others of God's trustworthiness in difficult times. Stephen Ministers also follow Jesus, giving sacrificially to show God's grace to others. There is one of many ministries, and ministry is only part of the way that we follow Jesus.

Jesus calls his disciples to listen to him, to know & believe in him, and to follow him. To know and believe without following is not discipleship. Following Jesus first takes listening to him and learning to recognize his voice, and trusting in him—trusting enough to follow him even into the valley of the shadow of death.

To follow Jesus, we put into our lives what Jesus teaches, shaping our conscience and our outlook and daily living in accordance with God's priorities. We seek to understand God's commandments in Holy Scripture and how to live out those commandments in our lives. We follow Jesus as we give of ourselves to others as Jesus gave himself for us. We follow Jesus as we endure hardship even as Jesus endured hardship and overcame it for us.

These are key steps to discipleship: listening to Jesus, knowing & believing in Jesus with faith and trust, and following Jesus in our lives.

These are the faithful responses to what Jesus has done for us: Jesus speaks to us, Jesus knows us, Jesus guides us. With Jesus as our Good shepherd, he will lead us beside still waters and to green pastures. He will guide us along the right pathways. In the valley of the shadow of death he will guide us *through* it, comforted and protected, and with our souls restored. He will provide for us, even as we face our enemies. And his goodness and steadfast love will pursue us all our life, and we will dwell with God forever.

May Jesus speak to you as you listen, help you to know him as he knows you, and guide you as you follow him.