

To Hear His Voice
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:1-5; 14-15; 22-30

“My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.”

Anyone who has visited the hills outside of Bethlehem will tell you that shepherds are not the affable characters with fair-haired features that you remember from Sunday school. “On the roads of Palestine and on the hills,” H.V. Morton wrote in his classic book *In the Footsteps of the Master*, “you see the good shepherd. . . . He is a man burnt almost black by exposure to the sun. He wears the flowing Bedouin head-veil, the keffiyeh, bound with two black twisted cords known as the agaal. Beneath his robes he often wears a sheepskin coat with the fleece turned next to the body. He is one of the many characters who walk the roads of Palestine exactly as they must have done in the time of our Lord.”

The closest I have ever been to a shepherd was on my first church study tour to the Holy Land. About twenty of us had signed up for a day in the Judean wilderness, picnic lunch included. At the crack of dawn, a safari jeep arrived at our kibbutz, driven by a guide who could not have come closer to being a reincarnation of John the Baptist had he been chosen by central casting in Hollywood. Thin, scruffy, wild hair, wilder eyes. I would not have been surprised had he greeted us with the Baptist’s angry shout, “You brood of vipers!” and then proceeded to drive us to the edge of the Jordan for a good dunking.

Instead he drove us far into the wilderness where Jesus just might have walked for forty days when he was tempted by the devil. Looking across the rocky valley, we could see ancient caves that are inhabited by hermits still. By midday we were hungry, cold and in need of a WC! Moche stopped the jeep and began to set out food. I do not remember what we ate that day, except that it was not the usual Middle Eastern fare I had come to love. What I will never forget, however, was the unexpected visit from a young shepherd girl. Poor and homeless, at least to our eyes, she had appeared because the food we barely could choke down was like manna in the wilderness to her hunger. That said, I imagine she knew the schedule of every tourist excursion to the Negev!

When she had her fill, we watched as this shepherdess gently led her flock on. By a pebble thrown first this way and then that, she kept them from the edge of the cliff; with deft calculation, she moved them from their scattered state on the hillside to a huddle; at the sound of her voice, the sheep followed. We followed too, for in this shepherdess, another shepherd came close. And still he comes even unto us, despite the distance of years and geography and condition. For like a shepherd, he knows his own and his own follow.

“A most remarkable thing,” H.V. Morton writes of his own encounter with a shepherd, “is the sympathy that exists between a shepherd and his flock. He never drives them as our own [English] shepherds drive their sheep. He always walks at their head, leading them along the roads and over the hills to new pasture. . . .”

How does a shepherd lead? Not with coercion. Not with a stick to beat the animal into obedience. Not with a flash of anger that inspires fear and therefore submission. Rather the good shepherd leads with compassion—a sympathy, an empathy, an affinity, an entering into the situation, the skin, the flesh of the sheep. She leads with a pebble well placed here and there. With the authority of one whom the sheep will follow because they can trust where the shepherd will lead them. With a love that imparts to the beloved a freedom in the very act of following. Like a shepherd, he gently leads, the prophet Isaiah once wrote. And so the good shepherd does.

“Then,” Morton continues, “as he goes, he sometimes talks to [his flock] in a loud, sing-song voice, using a weird language, unlike anything I have ever heard in my life. The first time I heard this sheep and goat language, I was on the hills at the back of Jericho (the very place we were that day). A goat-herd had descended into a valley and was mounting the slope of an opposite hill when, turning around, he saw the goats had remained behind to devour a rich patch of scrub.

“Lifting his voice, he spoke to the goats in a language that Pan must have spoken on the mountains of Greece. It was uncanny because there was nothing human about it. The words were animal sounds arranged in a kind of order. No sooner had he spoken than an answering bleat shivered over the herd, and one or two of the animals turned their heads in his direction. But they did not obey.

“The goat-herd then called out one word and gave a laughing kind of whinny. Immediately a goat with a bell round his neck stopped eating and, leaving the herd, trotted down the hill, across the valley and up the opposite slopes. The man, accompanied by this animal, walked on and disappeared round a ledge of rock.

“Very soon a panic spread among the herd. They forgot to eat. They looked up for the shepherd. He was not to be seen. They became conscious that the leader with the bell at his neck was no longer with them. From the distance came the strange laughing call of the shepherd and, at the sound of it, the entire herd stampeded into the hollow and leapt up the hill after him....It is all done,” Morton concluded, “by word of mouth.”

By word of mouth. So many other voices we follow in our lives. So many other words that lead us into the wilderness rather than out of it. How will we hear, how will our children hear, how will our officers hear his voice among all the rest? The closest we come to hearing the good shepherd is as we listen for his voice together in the words of Scripture. It is all done by word of mouth. Throughout the ages, the witness of the church is that the living Presence of the shepherd meets us and his voice addresses us, as we wrestle with what these stories and histories and letters are saying to us—here and now and at this moment in human history. Because God’s presence is never direct—is always mediated—the words sometimes have the effect of a pebble being thrown, first this way and then that, to keep us from the edge of the cliff. Other times we hear, through the words of Scripture, a voice that is like no other, leading us where we would never know to go unless, in these words, we hear God’s word calling us as God called Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Aaron, Ruth, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Mary, the twelve, and finally calling Paul to follow. Depending on the season of our lives, the shepherd says to us gently, “lie down here, in green pastures” or “come unto me all ye who are weary,” At other times he almost seems to shout, “Get thee up to a high mountain” or “Fool! Tonight your soul is required of you.” He feeds us, comforts us, challenges us, accompanies us, and most of all, he makes promises to us. “If the book rises and the letter speaks,” Karl Barth writes, “if the book is read and the letter understood, then with them the prophets and apostles and He of whom they testify rise up and meet the Church in a living way. It is not the book and the letter, but the voice of [those] apprehended through the book and the letter” that we may hear. How else shall we hear the voice of the shepherd except by word of mouth as, through these words, he has chosen to address his flock from the beginning?

But what if we should not hear? What if these words remain foreign to our secular ears and too strange for our reasonable minds to bear? What if other words have convinced us to follow another? What if, of a Sunday, we are in the habit of lingering to devour a rich patch of scrub apart from the flock? What if, trying to find our own way, we are lost on a narrow cliff, believing ourselves to be beyond the shepherd’s reach or care?

“Generally,” Morton continues, “the good shepherd comes along carrying over his shoulders a lamb or an injured sheep. “Which one of you,” he asks the church, which is his surrogate shepherd until the kingdom comes, “having a hundred sheep, if you have lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?” Until he finds it.

Like a shepherd, he comes after us, even enters the grave, until he finds us. Like a shepherd, it is always the injured one, the one who is lame, the one others reject, the one who is weak and afraid, the one who is hopelessly lost or in mortal danger: it is always that one he seeks, that one he finds, that one she lays on her shoulders, rejoicing. Like a shepherd, early on this morning, he is seeking you.

“Early one morning I saw an extraordinary sight not far from Bethlehem. (Morton, again.) Two shepherds had evidently spent the night with their flocks in a cave. The sheep were all mixed together and the time had come for the shepherds to go in different directions. One of the shepherds stood some distance from the sheep and began to call. First one, then another, then four or five animals ran toward him; and so on until he had counted his whole flock.

More interesting than the sight of this was the knowledge that Jesus must have seen exactly the same sight and described it in his own words:

He calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him; for they know not the voice of strangers. This parable spake Jesus unto them....I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep and am known of mine.”

“You cannot go very far along the roads of Palestine,” Morton concludes, “without encountering the figure who, staff in hand, symbolizes the love and compassion of Jesus Christ.” You cannot read very far along in the Bible, you cannot spend too many seasons in the midst of the flock that is his church, without hearing the voice of him whom to hear is to follow. May those who have been called into service by the voice of this congregation to be ordained and installed as deacons and elders, may they hear his voice more and more in the years ahead, as together we seek to lead this flock with the energy, intelligence, imagination and love given us in him. Thanks be to God.