

Shepherds and Sheep

by Ellen Williams Hensle 5/11/25

A very happy Mother's Day to those who are celebrating today! It's not uncommon for American Mother's Day and Shepherding Sunday to coincide, which feels appropriate. Jesus saying that his sheep hear his voice and follow him reminds me of a moment when Albert was a tiny baby, a moment I imagine many parents have experienced: I was across the room while someone else was holding him; I spoke and then I watched his head turn toward me. Clearly he had recognized the sound of my voice and wanted to know where I was. And in that instant I also recognized myself anew as his mother, the one he knows best, the one he listens for and listens to. Or at least used to listen to – I'm learning that 4-year-olds aren't quite so attentive to the sound of their parents' voices.

Apparently sheep also learn to recognize the voices of their shepherds. One sheep breeder, responding in an online forum about whether sheep really know who their shepherd is, shared that her sheep seem to recognize not only her voice, but also her face and the sound of her approaching vehicle. When her sheep see her or another member of her family, they run to the fence and start "baa-ing their heads off," she said, continuing "They know who brings the food and water, cleans their pens and gives them pets and skritches." Conversely, when a stranger comes to the pen, the sheep will clump together and run as far as they can away from that person. Studies have shown that in addition to recognizing the faces and voices of their carers, sheep can learn their own names and distinguish between as many as 200 individual faces.

As an infant can recognize the voice of a parent, as sheep can recognize the voice of a shepherd, so we are called to attend to the voice of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Jesus of course places himself in a long political and religious tradition when he self-identifies as the shepherd of God's people. Shepherd was a favored title of kings in the Ancient Near East, as they styled themselves compassionate caregivers of their subjects. The prophet Ezekiel condemns the kings of Israel as neglectful shepherds who have in fact failed to care for the flock God has entrusted to them. And of course we have the image of Godself as shepherd, as in everyone's favorite psalm, Psalm 23.

Earlier this week when I asked the Wednesday Bible study to close their eyes and picture God, a number of people said that a shepherd is the first image that comes to mind: one who leads them to somewhere green and peaceful, one who gives cold water to drink, one who strokes their heads and speaks in peaceful tones. Just thinking about that, I involuntarily exhale.

While we regularly read Psalm 23 at bedsides or funerals, we don't take time to study it very often, so I want to share a few details about it to add texture to our understanding. First, in the phrase "he restores my soul," that word we translate "soul" is *nefesh*, Hebrew for "life breath." In the Biblical understanding, without *nefesh*, human beings – all creatures – are not alive. So "he restores my soul" is something more like a description of, as one commentator put it, "divine CPR, where God brings us back to life."¹ When we feel almost dead, God puts the life breath back in us.

Additionally, the word for anointing used in Psalm 23, as in, "you anoint my head with oil," is not the normal word used for sacramental anointing, as one might receive anointing for healing or when being commissioned for religious service. Instead the Hebrew word means "to make fat," a "sensuous word, suggesting a life with enough prosperity and comfort to enjoy oil massaged into one's hair."² You may have imagined God stroking your head, but have you ever imagined God giving you a moisturizing scalp massage? That takes Psalm 23 to a different place, doesn't it?

Jesus calls on the whole history of kings as shepherds of the people and God as the ultimate Good Shepherd when he makes his claim to Messiahship in today's reading from the Gospel of John. Jesus is in Jerusalem at the time of the Festival of Dedication, better known to us as Hanukkah. You probably know the story of the oil for the lamps in the temple miraculously lasting for eight days. But that story is part of a broader history of the Jerusalem temple being rededicated. About 150 years before Jesus's birth, God's people had been forced by the conquering Syrians to burn offerings to Syrian gods in their temple. Once the Jewish leader Judas Maccabeus and his army had expelled the Syrians from Jerusalem, the desecrated altar had to be destroyed and a new one built and dedicated. Hanukkah, which means dedication, commemorates that event.

So it makes sense that at the time of this particular festival, all about God's people dedicating themselves to the proper worship of God – it makes sense that people in Jerusalem would have questions for Jesus about his identity as Messiah. Will he be a military leader like Judas Maccabeus, sent by God to deliver them from the oppressive crush of Roman occupation?

1. Marci Auld Glass, "Psalm 23: Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship," *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.
2. *Ibid.*

Or might he be a dangerous voice, leading them astray to improper worship, as they Syrians had? The people ask Jesus for a plain answer, though in typical Jesus fashion he doesn't exactly give them one.

Instead, he shares three interrelated themes. First, he encourages them to pay attention to his deeds. "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me," he says. He also refers to himself, not for the first time, as the shepherd. The sheep who belong to his fold know his voice and follow him. He gives them eternal life and they are safe in his hand, just as the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 leads the sheep to green pastures and still waters. And Jesus emphasizes his oneness with the Father: his purposes are perfectly aligned, perfectly at one, with God's purposes.

How do we know the voice of the Good Shepherd? A baby learns its birth parent's voice in utero as the sense of hearing begins to develop; by the third trimester of pregnancy, a baby can recognize her mother's voice. Though that voice is muffled and low before birth, the tones and rhythms are recognizable to the child after birth. Similarly, sheep learn to recognize their shepherd's voice through time and exposure – another sheep owner on that same internet forum remembered that it took about three months for her new herd to get accustomed to her voice and come when she called instead of huddling in the far corner of the pen.

So we too need practice hearing our Shepherd's voice. Participating in worship, studying Scripture, spending time in prayer, building community with other disciples, other sheep, if you will – these are all ways we can practice hearing God's voice speaking to us. As we internalize the tones and rhythms of that voice, we learn to recognize when the Shepherd is calling us and to follow where he leads us. Like a baby growing inside his mother's womb, or a sheep getting to know the voice of her caregiver, with time and repetition we learn to hear the Shepherd's voice more clearly.

And we may also need tools for discernment, tools to help us distinguish the Good Shepherd's voice from the cacophony of voices around us – and inside us. You don't need me to tell you how noisy the world is, how many voices are trying to claim political or religious or spiritual authority over our lives, how many voices are shouting "over here, follow me!", how many people claim to speak for the shepherd. It can be a challenge to pick out Jesus's voice in the midst of that mess. Jesus himself tells the people walking with him in the temple that if they want to know who he is, they should take note of his deeds. These deeds testify to his character – and as we learn Jesus's character, we learn to judge the voices we hear by the measure of that character.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus's deeds include turning water into wine at a wedding so the party can keep going. His deeds include healing a boy who is near to death without even being in the same room with him. His deeds include crossing borders of race and gender and entrenched political divisions to make a Samaritan woman the first person to whom he reveals his true identity as Messiah. His deeds include feeding 5000 people without asking who deserves it, to show everyone that he is the bread of life. His deeds include letting anyone and everyone ask questions, challenge him, try to learn more. His deeds include humbly washing his disciples' feet. His deeds include willingly laying down his life for his friends.

So as we study Jesus's deeds and learn his character, we learn to distinguish his voice from the other voices we hear. If it sounds like cruelty, it's not the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like fearmongering, it's not the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like people going hungry, then it's not the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like building walls instead of bridges, it's not the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like my way or the highway, if it sounds like nationalistic triumphalism, then it's not the voice of the shepherd.

But if it sounds like deep and lasting joy, it might be the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like healing, for physical bodies or for troubled souls, then it might be the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like welcome, like drawing diverse people together into community, it might be the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like enough for everyone, and plenty to spare, then it might be the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like humble service, it might be the voice of the shepherd. If it sounds like deep-seated peace, both in our own lives and in the world, it's probably the voice of the shepherd.

"My sheep hear my voice," Jesus says. "I know them and they follow me." As we learn to hear our Good Shepherd's voice, to distinguish it from those who would lead us astray, and as we turn to follow in that way, Jesus leaves us with a profound promise: "I give them eternal life," he says, "and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." Even when we get confused, even when we follow the wrong voice, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death – God is with us. We are safe in God's hands. No evil can snatch us away. As an infant snuggles down in her mother's arms, so we rest secure in the embrace of God's love, and the Good Shepherd speaks a word of life to us again.

1. Marci Auld Glass, "Psalm 23: Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship," *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.
2. *Ibid.*