

“How to hear the Shepherd’s voice”

*Psalm 23; John 10:1-6, 11-18
(First Mennonite Church, May 2, 2021)*



I remember a conversation I had a long time ago with my now-adult daughter. When she was a child, Lindsay and I would take our turns saying a prayer and tucking her in at bedtime.

These were wonderful moments at the end of the day. We’d review the good things that had happened, and say “thank-you” to God. Then we’d pull up the sheets, give her a kiss and say good night.



One night, after saying the prayer, she asked me, “Dad, does God speak to you?”

I told her that God’s voice was not something I could hear physically, with my ears, but that another sort of listening was involved.

More questions followed. “What is it like? Will I be able to hear God too?”

I assured her that she would.

But I could tell that she was troubled. She didn’t understand, exactly, and I don’t think I did a very good job of explaining. It’s a hard thing for any parent, especially on the spur of the moment.

“But how will I know that it’s God?” she asked. I told her that deep inside, in her heart of hearts, she would know. And said, “Good night. I love you.” And quickly made my escape.



Does God speak to us? Does God still engage with humanity? Does God have anything left to say, after all these years?

One mainline denomination in the United States, the United Church of Christ, uses this figure as its logo. “God is still speaking” it says — with a comma rather than a period, to emphasize that God’s communication has not stopped, but rather is ongoing.

It comes from the conviction that Christ is alive. And that our faith grows and even changes over time as the risen Lord continues to lead his people.



In our gospel reading today, Jesus tells the disciples that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. “I know my own, and they know me.”

Somehow, we’re supposed to *know* this Jesus. And that “knowing” implies a very special, intimate relationship. It’s not the kind of knowledge you get from a book.

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

Jesus compares the intimacy he has with his disciples to the even deeper and more profound mystery of his own relationship with God.



And now he lets those first-century disciples in on a little secret: They aren’t the only ones who will hear the Shepherd’s voice. Far from it.

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

“They too will listen to my voice.” You see, there *is* a voice to be heard. The Shepherd does have something to say to us. Possibly many things, at different times and stages of our lives.

And I don’t know about you, but there are days when I am desperate to hear it!

If this Shepherd, who cares for the sheep, who walks beside us through dark valleys, who feeds us, protects us, blesses us ... if this Shepherd were to speak to you today, what do you think that Shepherd would have to say?

We have this longing to hear the voice of God. It's a longing for connection, a longing for relationship with the very one who made us. A longing to know and be known.

So how do we hear that voice?



Well, I want to go in two different directions today. First I want to name some things in our faith tradition that are tested and true. These are good things to bear in mind and they can be a guide to us in our listening.

But then I also want to say some things about those times when we cannot hear. Because we all pass through them. And when we do, we need to know that we're not alone. And that God is still at work in our lives, whether we realize it or not.



So first, what does our faith tradition teach us about listening to God's voice?

Well we're encouraged to *pray*, that's one thing.

And prayer is not only speaking — raising our voice to God. It's also *listening* — making a space in our lives so that God can speak to us.

Setting aside some time in our day to pray and meditate and be with God can be an important thing. Whether it's early in the morning before activities begin, or late at night before we settle in to sleep, or another time of our own choosing whenever we can be attentive to the stirrings of God's Spirit. Taking time to be in God's presence is necessary if we want to hear that voice.



The voice of God is heard in *scripture*.

This is why we read and study these sacred texts. We want to hear God speaking to us. Yes, even still. Even today!

The scriptures speak to us from another time and place. And sometimes they can seem strange and unfamiliar, out of date and anachronistic.

Yet, as we hear them, we recognize that there is something *timeless* in these ancient writings that speaks across generations. And that even now they have power to guide and inform our lives.

The scriptures are worth paying attention to! In the written word, we hear the Divine word, the voice of God.

It's worth mentioning, I think, that we read the scriptures together in community, not just individually. We discern God's voice best when we study and share with one another. When we listen to our brothers and sisters and the insights they may bring.



And here's another thing: In the written word we meet the *Word made flesh*, who is Jesus.

"Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear, things I would ask him to tell me if he were here: scenes by the wayside, tales of the sea, stories of Jesus, tell them to me."

The living Christ comes to meet us where we are, in the times and places we need to hear his voice.



How can this happen?

It's said that *variety* is the spice of life. So it's not surprising to learn that God speaks to many people in many different ways.

The Bible tells us about Moses, who was astonished by a burning bush. And a young lad name Samuel, who was tutored by Eli, an aged priest. And a prophet named Elijah who heard the voice in the sound of sheer silence while hiding in a mountain crag.

Scriptures tell us about Mary who was visited by an angel. And Joseph who heard it in a dream. And a raging Pharisee named Saul, who was knocked to the ground and rendered blind, so that God could finally say what needed to be said.

And who knows how God will speak to you, and speak to me? The variety of ways seems to be endless.



And did you know there is *another book*, another Holy Scripture?

It's all around us! It's a voice that's embedded in the very fabric of God's *creation*.

Listen to what St. Augustine had to say about that:

"Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it, read it. God, whom you want to discover never wrote that book with ink. Instead he set before your eyes the things that he had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?"¹

If any of you have spent time in God's good creation, you will know exactly what Augustine was talking about: Looking up at the stars. Hiking in the mountains. Standing out in the wide-open wind-swept prairie. Listening quietly to the sounds of the forest. Walking on a beach. Seeing the sun set in the evening. You'd have to be spiritually deaf not to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd!

I remember saying to somebody that if I didn't have the opportunity to get out of the city sometimes, I think my soul would shrivel up. Not that God isn't also found in the city! But for me, being in the natural world is replenishing and renewing. Maybe it is for you as well.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. . . . Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”² So writes the Psalmist.

Have you heard the Shepherd’s voice in the things that God has made?



But now, I want to turn in a slightly different direction. Because there are times in our lives when we *can’t* hear the voice of God.

Have you ever been in a place like that?

A few years ago, the world was shocked when some of Mother Teresa’s private papers came to light. We’d always seen the public face of this tiny woman who lived life large and set us all a saintly example of faith in action, caring for the poorest of the poor. We saw her playful smile and watched her beam with delight when she was around children.

But *inside*, we learned, her life was often full of doubt and despair. In one letter to her spiritual director, she wrote about her struggles. She felt as though God had thrown her away as unwanted, unloved:

“I call, I cling, I want, and there is no one to answer. . . . Love — the word — it brings nothing. I am told God lives in me — and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”³

There was a brief period when she was able to pierce that darkness. After that, God remained silent for the next 50 years.

And yet Mother Teresa remained faithful, believing that her suffering was an opportunity to participate in the suffering of Christ.



There are times, I believe, when we all find ourselves in such a place.

So what do we say to that? Has the Shepherd abandoned us?

This is not something we control. We're not meant to snap our fingers and have God jump to our command.

Even if we do everything we can to prepare our hearts and place ourselves in such a position as to be receptive to God's word, there is no guarantee of response — at least not as we may wish. (God *will* respond, but it will be in God's time and God's way.)

Sometimes we just have to *wait*. And waiting is one of the hardest things there is.

We wait for that voice, for an answer to prayer, for some clear direction in the way God wants us to go. We wait for the darkness to lift. We wait to be consoled. We wait for hope to return, and the loneliness to be broken.

That waiting can seem to take almost forever.

Yet, like Mother Teresa, we are called to remain faithful.



In these situations I find some strength from Paul's assurance that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness." When we come to a point where our prayers seem empty and lifeless, "the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

And the way I understand that is that the Holy Spirit who has come to live within me reaches out to that of God that far transcends me. So that somehow, prayer is still happening. And that precious relationship between God and creature, Shepherd and sheep, still exists.

The life of faith does not all depend on *us*, you know.



A few years ago my daughter, the same one I told you about at the beginning of the sermon, gifted me with a painting, one that she herself had made.

The scene is a landscape of apparent barrenness. The sun is setting beyond the horizon and there is little sign of life.

But in the bottom half, below the surface of the earth, there are birds and fish and roots and rainbows. It's all quite unexpected!

I don't know if she'd be happy with my analysis of her creative work, but the way I see it, there is a *hidden* reality to our lives. There are things going on just below the surface that we don't have a clue about.

There *is* life where we can see no life. The work of God is mysterious and often hidden from our view. But it's still there!

So we walk by faith, not by sight. And we trust our lives to One whose loving care, we believe, never leaves us.



Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me"

He says he goes ahead of us, and calls to us. And that we will follow him. We will not follow the voice of strangers. We will follow the one we know.

Does God have anything left to say to us, after all these years? Yes, I believe so. Many things.

But the first thing and the last thing God has to say are always the same:

"You are the flock. I am the Shepherd. I love you. You are mine!"

This Shepherd walks with us even through dark valleys. The Shepherd does not run away in the face of danger, but will be present with us in our time of need.

And that, my friends, is good news! Thanks be to God!

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/36421-some-people-in-order-to-discover-god-read-books-but>, (Accessed May 1, 2021.)

² Psalm 19:1-4.

³ <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/faith-and-character/faith-and-character/mother-teresas-long-dark-night.html>, (Accessed April 24, 2021.)