

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 23; John 10:22-30
April 25, 2010
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Last week Juanita and I had an appointment in Powhatan County. Across the street from the office building where we met with a financial consultant was the loveliest farm with pasture land full of sheep. There were ewes and as many lambs grazing and prancing about in the fresh green grass. I could have watched them for hours and would have chosen to invest our small nest egg with this financial group just to come and see the inspiring pastoral scene.

The sheep in Powhatan didn't need a shepherd because they were fenced in. But in Jesus' time such private property and enclosed pastures didn't exist. There were lots of what today we'd call public lands for sheep to graze and find drinkable water. Shepherds were necessary to keep the flock together, fed, watered and safe from predators.

During the day the flocks were fine out in the open eating and drinking, but nighttime posed serious threats from wild animals and thieves. Therefore, the shepherds would gather their sheep into sheepfolds – protected areas bound by stonewalls. Those sheepfolds were large enough for more than one flock, so at night the herds comingled. Multiple shepherds could better guard their charges and take shifts watching and listening for intruders.

In the morning, Shepherd Jacob would call to his sheep, and they would follow him out of the sheepfold because they recognized the sound of his voice. Similarly, Shepherd Thaddeus would call to his and they would separate themselves from the others.

Therefore, Jesus says in today's gospel lesson from John, "My sheep hear my voice." The Jewish leaders who gathered around Jesus that day to question him could not hear or did not choose to hear Jesus' voice. They rejected him and his message in spite of deeds of phenomenal healing because they had vested interests to protect. They were the power holders, and they wouldn't relinquish control to anyone, even God's son. Their practice of the Jewish religion, which centered on the Temple, didn't have room for people with new ideas or constructive criticism. That fallen aspect of our human nature is played out again and again by whoever holds the power, wealth or high ground. Regardless of how corrupt, unjust, or misguided it is, if a group is benefiting from the current social, political or religious order, they will fight tooth and nail to preserve and maintain the status quo.

Some current examples are Wall Street's resistance to regulation, the Catholic Church's former practice of protecting abusive priests and their bishops and the ongoing saga of the proper balance between individual rights, states rights and the federal government's power.

But larger entities and institutions are not unlike individuals like us who also resist to far lesser degrees when our self-interest seems threatened. We fight back and lash out. Few readily accept criticism. Juanita is an invaluable sounding board, but I bristle and argue even when she's right. We all need someone in our lives whom we can ask to tell us what we don't want to know about ourselves.

We are more likely to listen to the voices that help us get power or stay in power -- voices that reinforce what we believe. Jesus' sheep were initially the powerless or outcasts of his day -- the poor, sinners, lame, blind, tax collectors and women. They heard his voice because he cared enough to speak with them, eat with them and hear their cries for help.

I always cringe and am disquieted within during our Celtic Eucharistic prayers when I say, "We praise you that you were known first by poor shepherds and wise seekers as you are known today by the poor and outcast." I'm aware that there are few if any poor and outcast sitting in the pews.

We have become the church of the well-to-do, and we don't want that to change. We might want to ask ourselves as a flock if we hear the Good Shepherd's voice. We still need the Good Shepherd to lead us; otherwise we are prone to wander individually and collectively. How do we know his voice from the every-increasing myriad of voices that compete for our attention? Television, computers, cell phones, radio, iPods, iPods, books, newspapers, magazines and people.

You know I am not a big fan of these new technologies. I don't carry a cell phone, we still use the antenna on our house and I have no page on Facebook. I do use my computer at church and am glad for it. My sons are easy targets for my anti-technology propaganda, and George especially because he lives in nearby Richmond. Last week during dinner, George said, "You know, Dad, I think you're right about all that stuff. My laptop died, and I cancelled my cable and I really like it."

In this technological age we can allow ourselves to be bombarded and saturated with noise and voices, images and ideas. This is not to say the Holy one can't speak to us through any and all of those mediums, but God's voice may get drowned out or distorted.

The best source of hearing the divine voice is obviously in the Bible and for us the Christian texts especially. There is no comparable alternative for reading and studying Holy writ, if we want to be guided on right pathways. Even scholars don't agree on everything in the Bible, but the message to love one another is not debated.

I also still think we need solitude in our lives to listen to God's voice in our hearts. Claire invited those who could last Thursday, Earth Day, to meet her at the labyrinth between 10:30 and 12:30. She gave those who came a pamphlet she developed with some resources to use as we entered and proceeded on the silent, holy walk.

A quote by a Christian mystic Meister Eckhart caught my attention: “If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar – I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.”

On my walk in the labyrinth, I stopped to watch a tiny insect for awhile. The labyrinth, with its circling-in design, always causes me to look within myself and gain divine insights. Then I must come out and put them into practice among people. That day I was also especially grateful for the warm sun, green foliage, gentle wind and clear blue sky. The natural creation is God’s greatest gift to us. In nature, unplugged from all man-made devices, we can hear the Good Shepherd call our name and assure us of our eternal place in his flock. There as here we can be still and know that God is. There and here we can sing out with the holy multitude, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!”

There and here he revives my soul; my cup runneth over. The Lord is my shepherd. Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. Amen.