

Back in Lent, we spent quite a bit of time reading through John's Gospel for our Parish Reading Project. We also had a number of Sunday lessons during Lent that focused on Jesus' extended interactions with people in the Gospel of John.

This week and next, we again have lessons from the Gospel of John. But these parts of John are more monologues than conversations. Yet the words are familiar and comforting and are worth spending some time considering.

Today, the 4th Sunday of Easter, is often nicknamed Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year on this Sunday, we read approximately one-third of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, the chapter in which Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd.

We heard the beginning of that chapter today. Jesus uses the image of the shepherd standing at the gate of the sheep pen, calling for his sheep. The sheep pen was sort of a rough corral for the sheep. In the morning, a Middle Eastern shepherd would go to his sheep pen and call his sheep to come and follow him.

At night, the sheep pen offered protection for the sheep inside. The sheep pen was a good place to spend the night in relative safety from predators. But it wasn't a good place to spend the day.

A 1st century sheep would never be able to engage in extended sheltering in place in a 1st century sheep pen.

In the sheep pen, there was very little grass. Most of it had been trodden under. There was no real water, except the occasional puddle. The surface inside the sheep pen would have been mainly mud and sheep dung. Not a good place to spend the day.

So the shepherd would call his sheep by name and lead them out to find good grazing and good water. It's no accident that in the 23rd Psalm two of the key images are green pastures and quiet waters. Those were absolute necessities for sheep.

So if you were a sheep, the only way to live day by day was by following your shepherd every morning. If you remained in the pen, you would eventually die.

Thus in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus says the following about being our Good Shepherd:

"The (good shepherd) calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

They follow him. They know his voice.

Those two things are vital. If we're going to be in relationship with our Good Shepherd, we have to know and recognize his voice. And we have to obey and follow where he leads the way.

Those two things are vital. Listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd. And choosing to follow him. And I want to reflect on both of those things this morning.

You know as well as I do that we live in a world with many voices. Think about the advertising we're bombarded with. Advertising is everywhere. Billboards by the road. Pop-up ads on the internet. Junk mail in your mailbox. Spam in your e-mail. Radio and television commercials. And one of my least favorite places is on the gasoline pumps. You used to be able to fill up in relative quiet, with perhaps a sign enticing you to come into the store for a snack. But now gas pumps have little video screens that play rather loud advertisements while you're pumping your gas. There's no escaping it.

On top of that, we have politicians and pundits telling us constantly how we should vote or what we should believe. We have 24-hour news cycle that absolutely beats some stories to death.

We have an entertainment industry that finds myriad ways through a number of different media to offer us diversions.

On the one hand, I'm thankful for the myriad offerings I can watch, especially during a time of social distancing.

On the other hand, did I really need to spend 7 hours of my life binge-watching *Tiger King*?

In the midst of all those voices, how do we tune in to our Good Shepherd? With the background noise of so many voices, how do we recognize Jesus' voice? How do we focus on listening to it?

There are a couple of classic ways: through scripture, and through silence.

One vital way to listen to your shepherd's voice is through Holy Scripture. It never ceases to amaze me how God can speak to me afresh through a passage I thought I knew backwards and forwards. The word of God in scripture is alive and active.

And if you're in a time of sheltering in place, you have a golden opportunity to devote some extra time to reading scripture. If you want suggestions on how to do that, go to "stpaulslubbock.org" and click on the link to "Spiritual resources."

There are many ways to read scripture. The important thing is to find a way that works for you. Because one of the best ways to listen for our shepherd's voice is through scripture.

Another vital way to listen is through silence. We have such a lack of silence in our culture. That means it's vitally important to cultivate silent spaces and times in our lives. It's often necessary to turn down the volume on all of the other voices screaming for our attention in order to hear the still small voice of God.

I don't know about your prayer life. I know in mine it's tempting to talk too much, and not listen enough. It's easy to offer praise and to offer my prayer requests. But it's much more difficult to spend some time in silence as well. And yet, in our 21st century world, this is one of the most important things we can add to our prayer life.

Of course, there are other ways as well. God often speaks through the marvels of his creation. God can also speak to us through other people. But in all cases we have to pay attention and listen.

Listening to our shepherd's voice. That's a vital part of being a Christian. But there's more involved than just listening. There's also following. Sheep LISTEN to the shepherd's voice and FOLLOW where he leads. Every morning in the sheep pen, they have to choose to listen to their shepherd's voice, so that he can lead them out.

Sometimes, in our religious lives, we get the idea that deciding to follow is a one-time deal. You come to faith in Jesus, and then you coast. But that's not the way of the Christian life.

Instead, we have to commit ourselves day by day to following. We have to go to our wardrobes every morning and choose the garment of a faithful follower, a faithful sheep. Our culture would encourage us to clothe ourselves in many other ways. Thus we have to choose, every day, to put on the woolly, fleecy covering of an obedient follower of Jesus Christ.

Some of you may be familiar with the Rule of St. Benedict. This remarkable document was written almost 1,500 years ago. It has been a guidebook to those who have chosen to live a monastic life ever since. But it also contains much wisdom for living the ordinary Christian life.

St. Benedict has some interesting things to say about clothing. He makes a big deal about how when a monk gets new clothing, a new habit, he should give the old worn out set to the poor (*Rule 55*). But then, later on he says something that is a bit jarring.

He talks about when new people come to the monastery and decide to be monks. After they have lived there a while, if they still want to make their vows, they're required to give all of their possessions away. And then, in the ceremony where they make their vows, their old street clothes are removed, and they put on the new monastic habit, the new clothing of a monk.

And then they do something with the old street clothes (*Rule 58*). You might expect that they would give them to the poor. But they don't give them away. You might expect them to burn the street clothes as a sign that there's no going back. But they don't do that either. Instead, they do something strange.

They put the new monk's street clothes in a closet with the old street clothes of all the other monks. Why on earth would they do that?

They do it for this reason. Every morning, when the monks get up, they have to make an intentional effort to put on their monastic clothing. Every morning they have a choice. They can get up, put on their monastic habit, and choose to continue on as a monk. Or they can walk

down the hall, put on their street clothes, and leave the monastery forever. Every day. They have to make that choice to continue to follow.

Likewise, we have to make the choice, every day, whether or not to be an obedient follower of Jesus Christ.

Am I going to greet the world today with love or hostility? Will I try to serve others or look out for number one? Will I live with forgiveness or vengeance? Humility or arrogance? Joy or despair? Faith or fear?

Everyday I have to make those choices. Every day, I have to decide whether or not I'm going to follow the voice of my shepherd.

Every day he calls to you.

Do you love him enough to listen?

Do you trust him enough to follow?