

“Recognizing His Voice”

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“I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me... My sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me...”

Jesus said these words to the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. They served as both a critique of the leadership of those authorities (whom he compared to day laborers who did not care about the sheep) and a consolation and instruction for those seeking the Messiah, an alternative shepherd.

Jesus presents himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament promises that envision the Messiah in pastoral terms. Who wouldn't want to follow the shepherd of Psalm 23 who accompanies us through the valley of darkness and prepares a banquet in front of our enemies? Or follow the shepherd of Jeremiah chapter 23.3-4 who alleviates fears and terror? The messianic promises of the Old Testament are replete with images of the Good Shepherd, which the Church then applies to Jesus in sacred writings and art.

I want to focus on a single aspect of the Good Shepherd metaphor in John 10 that I believe is essential to building and living our Christian life in the 21st century: the voice of the Good Shepherd. Jesus told the crowd listening that his sheep knew his voice and would follow him, rather than the voice of a stranger they did not recognize.

Vital to the most basic following of Jesus is recognizing his voice and distinguishing his voice from all those that would lead us in other directions. Today we live in a world with so much noise that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the voice of Jesus among all the other voices. I think this is by design. Even Jesus himself warned us: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but beneath them are ravenous wolves" (Mt. 7:15).

Even in the time of Jesus, he had to deal with voices of opposition, especially from the religious leaders of Israel. Today there are certainly voices that are openly hostile to anything remotely related to Jesus. Those are perhaps the easiest distractions to discern and overcome.

More subtle voices may be more difficult to discern. Those voices that in appearance are very similar to the voice of Jesus, but if we pay a little attention we can notice that their message is contrary to the gospel of love proclaimed by our pastor.

Then, of course, there are the bad voices that can distract us. They compete with the voice of the Good Shepherd, leading us away from sinful behaviors that are destructive to our body and soul. They call us to join other flocks that distance us from the purpose God has for us.

The Good Shepherd wants to help us avoid this fate by listening to his voice and belonging to his flock.

It stands to reason that the more time we spend conversing with another person, the more we will come to know and recognize their voice. We are more likely to recognize the voice of a sibling, roommate, or colleague than that of a stranger or acquaintance. The same goes for our relationship with the Good Shepherd. The more time you spend with him in conversation, the more likely you are to be able to distinguish his voice from the noise.

In many ways, the following are basic suggestions for spiritual growth:

- develop a private prayer life,
- participate in the life of the Church,
- study her Word,
- spend time with other Christians,
- surround yourself with reminders of the voice of the Lord,
- invoke the Holy Spirit and
- read the scriptures.

While all of these suggested tools for spiritual growth are helpful, I want to focus on two: staying close to the Church and devouring the Scriptures.

“Being close to the Church” is essential to get closer to the Good Shepherd and recognize his voice. John 10 says that the Good Shepherd calls us by name and we follow Him. He takes us out of the fold when we go out to find pasture. The Church itself can represent both the sheepfold (Jesus says that he himself is the door of the sheepfold) and the pasture.

It is grass because it is the place where we find food for our life as disciples, especially in the sacraments. For example, baptism makes us part of his flock, the Eucharist nourishes us and strengthens us to follow him, and with Reconciliation our wounds are bandaged and healed.

As a sheepfold, the Church is a place of refuge. As such, the Church helps us hear and recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd through association with other disciples. Our brothers and sisters in Christ help us discern the directions in which the Good Shepherd invites us to walk. This pilgrimage is best done in the company of other believers who can help us authenticate the voice of Jesus. Christian friends support us when we struggle along the way and help us correct our course when we have lost our way.

As a place of refuge, the Church also helps us grow as disciples. It offers opportunities to study and pray, both of which help us become familiar with the voice of the Lord. Staying close to the Church helps us discern when wolves in sheep's clothing try to snatch us from the Good Shepherd's flock. The Holy Spirit was given to the Church as a teacher and encourager of the faithful. The Holy Spirit also guides the Church and helps it remain faithful in its teachings and practices.

Above all, we always know that there is a place where we can hear the voice of the Good Shepherd: the Holy Scripture. Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures is essential to follow the Good Shepherd. Saint Jerome warned: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." The opposite is also logical: knowing Christ, knowing the Scriptures. We call the Bible "the Word of God," and we know that we will find that Word when we read and study the Bible.

Studying the Scriptures is literally an exercise in listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Paul told his young protégé: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refuting, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, so that he who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Finally, we should not expect the voice of the Good Shepherd to always be the loudest. Sometimes we need to shut up to hear his voice. The prophet Elijah experienced this on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:11-13). God sent him to a cave to wait. Elijah knew that God would pass. While he was waiting for God, there were three natural events: a fire, an earthquake, and a severe wind storm, all of which, in other times and places, foreshadowed the presence and power of God. But Elijah knew God's voice well enough to know that God was not present at those events. Then there was a "soft whisper" and Elijah hid his face from it because God was silent. Sometimes, we just need to turn off the noise around us and be quiet, listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd deep in our hearts. When we learn to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, he promises to lead us to a more abundant life. (John 10:10).

In certain parts of the world there are still shepherds who march at the head of their flocks.

The sheep are loose and there are no fences to block their path. They travel through enormous areas of mountains and valleys following a shepherd who knows the terrain and is in charge of leading them to places with water and fresh grass. The shepherd makes sure that the sheep are not attacked and scattered by wolves or other predators that may be lurking, and he makes sure that they do not fall off a cliff and get hurt or killed. And he can do all this precisely because the sheep know him, recognize his voice and go to meet him when he calls them.

Just as those sheep depend on their shepherd, they know they are cared for by him, we also have a shepherd on whom we depend. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, calls us by name so that every day we are under his protection and care.