

“The Shepherd’s Voice”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, April 25, 2021

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” The shepherd is the one who guards his flock, who searches for the lost sheep until it is found, who rescues the sheep from danger, who leads the sheep beside the still waters.

People were sharing a video this week on Facebook that had a person lifting with great difficulty a sheep that had become wedged into a deep crevice in the ground. Only to have the sheep, now free, run and bound into the next rut in the ground, to be just as stuck as before! Sounds rather like our own lives. Where Jesus is the shepherd, and we are his sheep, and time and time again Jesus pulls us out of the ruts we have wedged ourselves into, and puts us on a new path, only to have us fall into the next crevice ahead of us.

Many churches have a stain glass window of ‘The Good Shepherd’ in their sanctuaries, often depicted as Jesus holding a lamb on his shoulders or in his arms. At Stouffville United, we have a window over our balcony, and in the middle is a lamb, with the words underneath, “Feed my Lambs”. All of these windows are inspired by the scripture in John 10: “I am the good shepherd ... My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27)

The image of the shepherd is found throughout our Bible, the most well-known reference coming from the words of the Twenty Third Psalm, which is attributed to David. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul.” The Twenty Third Psalm is probably the most beloved text of all of scripture. More people can recite lines from this than the Lord’s Prayer. It is part of funerals. It is integral to our faith in our understanding of dying – “Yeah though I go through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me – thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel has several references to the shepherd in his prophecies, including these words from Chapter 34, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” (Ezekiel 34: 23) And this, “You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God.” (Ezekiel 34: 30-31)

How is it that the sheep recognizes the voice of the shepherd? It was a well-known fact in these earlier biblical times that the sheep did indeed recognize and follow their shepherd’s voice. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “In Palestine today, it is still possible to witness a scene that Jesus almost certainly saw two thousand years ago, that of Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures they have grazed during the day. Often those flocks will end up at the same watering hole around dusk, so that they get all mixed up together – eight or nine small flocks turning into a convention of thirsty sheep. Their shepherds do not worry about the mix-up, however. When it is time to go home, each one issues his or her own distinctive call – a special trill or whistle, or a particular tune on a particular reed pipe, and that shepherd’s sheep

withdraw from the crowd to follow their shepherd home. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd's voice, and it is the only one they will follow.”<sup>1</sup>

Reality however is that in our daily lives, there are *other* voices that compete with the voice of the shepherd. And these other voices can overwhelm us in their persistence and allure. And our ear loses the sound of the voice of the shepherd. It is all too easy to be led astray by these distracting voices that call out to us. And like the fabled siren song, we follow them to places that leave us in darkness and despair. And yet, the voice of the shepherd continues to call to his sheep to come home, calling the sheep home, calling the sheep to safety.

So, yes, the Shepherd, the flock, the sheep – as Christians, we get what this means. It's found in our scriptures. It's in our hymns. It's in our stain glass windows. It's a part of our faith story.

A few weeks ago, I went for my first Covid 19 Vaccination appointment at the Ray Twinney Centre in Newmarket. York Region had opened up appointments to clergy who were doing funerals or working with people in palliative care. It was my turn to go sit at the registration desk. The clerk was a young woman in her twenties. I explained I was clergy. She looked puzzled. I showed her my business card and said I was the minister at Stouffville United. She still looked puzzled. Looking over her shoulder, I saw a big whiteboard and under 'New Categories', was listed 'spiritual leader'. I said, I'm a spiritual leader. She turned her head to check the whiteboard. And said, oh, ok. I get what that is. It means you are spiritual. That's really nice. And then she sent me through to the vaccination room.

So, thinking of our text today of the Shepherd and the sheep, I wondered, how would I ever explain this to the young woman at the Vaccination registration desk? How would I explain to her what it means to be part of a flock? To know what it means to be a sheep? That there is a voice I hear and follow that is the voice of the shepherd? How would I explain to her what it is that you and I find so comforting about being a sheep in a flock with a shepherd? What would I say to her?

Would I tell her that I hear the voice of the shepherd in the silence? Would I quote from Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God!” Or would it be more about the power of the voice – like in Psalm 29 – “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders; the voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare.”

Would I tell her that it is a voice like no other? It is not like my mother's voice or my father's. It is not like my grandmother's voice. It is a voice that I hear in the center of my being. It goes deeper than the voices of my loved ones.

Would I say that this voice is reflected in the soft colours of dawn's emerging light, or caught in the first birdsong of the day? That I can see it in the joyous undulating flight of a butterfly across a field? That its calm is found in the moonlight that streams across my room at night?

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1993), 141.

That it is a voice I have heard for most of my life, and that it will be there in my last moments, in my dying, a voice that will never leave me? That there is a hymn I sing that says this, “When the evening gently closes in and you shut your weary eyes, I’ll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise. I was there to hear your borning cry, I’ll be there when you are old. I rejoiced the day you were baptized, to see your life unfold.”<sup>2</sup> That this voice will be with me my whole life long, and beyond.

Would I tell her that this one voice is heard by many, in their own way, but that it is just as true to each person who hears that voice? That this voice does not discriminate or show preferential treatment but offers itself wholly and completely to the one who listens?

Would I confess to her that while the Shepherd’s voice is always calling out to the sheep it loves that I can miss the voice because I get too bogged down by earthly things that consume and weary me? And that it is a struggle to bring myself back to the tenderness of that Shepherd’s voice in my life? As Philip Newell, the former warden of Iona Abbey in the Isles of Scotland, writes, “Early in the morning I seek your presence, O God, not because you are ever absent from me but because often I am absent from you.”<sup>3</sup>

Would any of this help my young friend at the Vaccination desk understand why I am ok saying yes, I’m a sheep. And I’m part of a very big flock, who are trying our best to listen to the Shepherd’s voice, who leads us in surer ways than we can lead ourselves. Would any of this help her?

*And what would you add? What would you tell her?*

Jesus said, I am the good shepherd. My sheep hear my voice. I know them. And they follow me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> “I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry” Voices United Hymnal #644. Words and Music by John Ylvisaker 1985.

<sup>3</sup> J. Philip Newell, *Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter Morning and Night Prayer* (Toronto: Novalis, 2002), 74.