

## The Shepherd's Voice

TEXT: John 10:1-16

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on April 30, 2023*

In July of 1981 I took a trip to Iceland. There were many things about the country that I found fascinating, but I will always remember the sheep. One of the chief exports of Iceland is wool, and as a result, the island is alive with sheep. The ratio of sheep to people in Iceland is 1.2 sheep for every person. Paltry when compared to the Falkland Islands where there are 200 sheep per person, but still, Iceland has a lot of sheep. There were sheep everywhere we went.

But they weren't in large flocks on acres of pastureland. They were in small groups—twos and threes—in all kinds of places. There were some in pastures, there were some by the coast, there were some near the glaciers, and there were even some in the lava fields, where nothing green could be seen for miles.

Finally, I asked our guide about the sheep. I knew that sheep were not the brightest lights in the harbor, although when Randy read my note in the Messenger this week, she wrote with evidence that we have given sheep too little credit in the intelligence department. But their ability to navigate a maze had not kept them from wandering into a thoroughly barren lava field. So I asked our guide, "Why isn't someone caring for them?" How would anyone find them out here? I saw no brands or tags. How did the owners know who owned what, and how could they possibly be rounded up for breeding and shearing in the spring?

Most of Iceland is inaccessible except by four-wheel drive vehicles that can ford rivers and climb embankments. I have pictures from our vehicle as we drove through water up to the bottom of the windows and signs pointing the way to different places mounted in the middle of large rivers. At least half of our tour, which was a camping tour, was made up of native Icelanders, the only way they could access much of their own country's stunning interior. It's not the kind of terrain where you can drive large flocks with jeeps or even dogs or horses.

The guide's answers amazed me. The animals were penned up in sheepfolds in the spring for breeding and shearing. Then, as summer approached, the gates were opened and the animals were allowed to wander wherever their little sheep brains took them.

Then came the amazing part. In the fall, the shepherds go out into the countryside and call their sheep—not with special LL Bean sheep calls, but just with their own voices—their own call, their own communication with their own animals. And the sheep come to them—each sheep to its own shepherd. They know the voice. And the shepherd leads the sheep back to the fold to be protected and fed for the winter. I was astounded. And I thought instantly of John 10.

When I was in seminary, I took a preaching class on the Gospel of John. One of the men in our class preached a sermon from John 10, and a discussion followed. Another man in the class had worked for a time at a sheep ranch out west. As we talked, he said that he found the imagery in the passage too far-fetched—sheep didn't know anybody's voice, he said. All they understand is the running of the dogs. I told him about the sheep in Iceland.

I also told him about my own experience with the sheep I had. If I changed my appearance even slightly—if I put my hair up in a ponytail or wore a hat, they were spooked. Who is this person? Baaaaa! Help! But the minute I spoke to them; the minute they heard my voice, they calmed down and came running to me. He was surprised. "Well," he said at last, "we just slaughter ours anyway."

If the sermon ended right there, I think it would be complete. There are some passages of the Bible where we need to understand with our minds. In some passages we wrestle with the meaning of certain words or we struggle to understand the context and historical circumstances. But this is not a passage to be explained or understood through the intellect. This is a passage that speaks directly to the heart.

In the section before this, in John 9, Jesus has been wrangling with the Pharisees after he heals a man born blind and the Pharisees feel a need to *investigate* the healing because they didn't think the man deserved it. I mean, how very 2023 of them. They thought the blindness was an indication of God's punishment for the man's sin. Jesus was having none of it, and it got pretty heated.

I generally don't like to rag on the Pharisees, since much of Christian antisemitism has sprung from that kind of focus from Christians. The Pharisees were not some hate group that was anti-Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee; Joseph of Arimathea, the man who gave his own tomb for Jesus' body, was a Pharisee. The most pro-Jesus guy in the entire New Testament was a Pharisee—Paul. His conversion changed him a lot, but he remained a proud Pharisee.

But, like in Christianity today, there are heated theological arguments that have real-life consequences for people—including how we Christians talk about Pharisees—and the blind man in John 9 was caught in the crosshairs of one of those theological arguments. Jesus goes to bat for him, raising debate about faith, suffering, and the nature of the Messiah in the process. It's in Jesus' frustration with that encounter that he turns to the metaphor of sheep and shepherds in John 10.

The Pharisees want to argue from the head; Jesus wants to move the debate to the heart. They ask him a lot of questions and what he gives in response is not an intellectual treatise. It isn't even a story, like he gives to others who come to him for some Scriptural wrestling. Jesus gives them an image deeply engrained in Israelite history and culture; an image that would evoke a profound memory of their beginnings as shepherding nomads, and the young shepherd boy who would become king in their glory years a thousand years before Jesus' birth, the king whose lineage would produce the Messiah they were just arguing about, King David.

Jesus is evoking all of that as well as the thousand years between King David's time and his own, when the prophets of Israel made the shepherd one of the key metaphors for what a king should be and railed against those who got fat themselves while their sheep starved. It was a powerful metaphor for each of the Pharisees Jesus was speaking to, bringing to mind their roots, their responsibilities as religious leaders, and the ancient King whose heir they were looking for—the king who once composed a song that began, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” By placing their actions in the world of sheep and shepherds, Jesus shifts the mood from head to heart.

One last thing to understand about the metaphor in John 10 is the way Jesus talks about himself as the gate to the sheepfold. There were some folds with actual gates you could open and close. But when the sheep went out into the hills to graze, the sheepfolds out there were just round areas walled off with stone—no roof, the wall tall enough to keep sheep from jumping out and from seeing and getting spooked by an animal lurking nearby—but not so tall that a human thief couldn't climb over them.

But, out in the fields, those stone-walled sheepfolds did not have gates. Instead, when the sheep were brought into the fold each night, the shepherd lay down across the opening in the stone wall and slept there. The shepherd, in effect, became the gate. Anything going in or out of the designated opening would wake the shepherd. In an area that also harbored lions, bears, and other predators, going to sleep on the ground in front of a flock of tasty mutton sandwiches was a dangerous job.

So, when Jesus says in John 10 that he is the gate and that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, a very literal image of a shepherd lying down as the gate to protect the sheep from predators of all kinds would have come vividly to mind. Shepherds were also a kind of permanent underclass in Israel. They were necessary. Sheep were not just sweet friends or pets, they were food and clothing and currency. But the job of a shepherd was dirty and dangerous, so many felt the job was below any actual family members to care for their sheep and hired shepherds who they both needed and despised. A shepherd was not even allowed to be a witness in a legal matter. Like women, they didn't count as full members of society.

So Jesus equating himself with a shepherd—not a hired hand but the actual owner of the sheep doing a shepherd’s job—is, in one metaphor, the undermining of systems of human power that characterize his whole ministry. He, like David, is the shepherd king. Leader of all and servant of all, together. God who became flesh and took on the humiliation of the cross in order to transform death into life. Laying down his life, not for the high and mighty—they had enough protection. He lay down his life for the sheep.

John 10 focuses on both the gate and the voice of the shepherd. When a person of privilege willingly sets that aside to protect the vulnerable; when a person is willing to take on hate and humiliation and danger by standing in-between those who have no status except as currency or other utility and the powerful who want to use them, let me tell you, those sheep know the voice of their shepherd, even if they’ve never met the person.

Jesus here is saying, yes, that’s who I am. When you hear the voice of humility—of one who could sit at the best seat but instead sits with the powerless; when you hear the voice of one who could have it all and could take even more but instead gives away what they have so that no one will starve; when, as Jesus says in Matthew 10:42, “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...none of these will lose their reward.” The voice of service; the voice of one who stands with you and not above you; the voice that will speak for you when you have been silenced and take the incoming heat. That voice is instantly recognized and beloved in every nation and culture around the globe. It is the voice of love; it is the voice of Jesus; it is the voice of God.

“I know my own,” Jesus says in verse 14, “and my own know me.” Yes, yes they do.

And, just as you think he’s getting pretty exclusive, with talk of “my own,” he broadens it out to talk about sheep in other sheepfolds who will—once they hear the voice—recognize in it the voice of home, safety, and care. Ending in a vision of one single fold with one shepherd—not because the sheep of other folds have been slaughtered or cast out, but because all will have recognized the voice and come in, even if the shepherd is wearing a hat or has her hair in a ponytail and seems scary at first.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; she leads me beside the still waters. They restore my soul.” These are the songs of the heart. You may not relate to the image of a shepherd. Maybe you have never even been within ten feet of an actual sheep. But many of us—and I believe all of us in time—know what it’s like to be alone in the barren wasteland; to be lost, without direction, so that when you call out there is not even an echo of your voice to fill the void. And then, on the brink of despair, we hear the voice.

Some hear it in houses of worship or in song. Others recognize it in the swells of the oceans, amidst the chattering squirrels, in the shadow of a painting, running across the strings of a cello, in the prayers of a child. It’s the voice that called the world into being and the voice that called from a cross, “Father, forgive them...they know not what they do.” It’s the voice that first set the rhythm of our heartbeat, the voice that named us before time.

We don’t need ears to hear it, we don’t need minds to understand it. It’s a voice that is heard with the heart. The voice of one who lays down in front of our vulnerability to say to whatever predator stalks us, “You shall not pass.” And we respond, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

As I sat yesterday trying to figure out how to bring this sermon home, I got an email from our own Ben Crocker, who lost his father this past week after the long and foggy road of dementia. Ben’s dad, the Rev. Joseph Herbert Crocker, was a Methodist pastor. A shepherd of the sheep in whatever places he served. His description of the final days and hours with his father were so beautiful and moving, I got his permission to share it with you. Ben writes,

“As painful as the loss is, we were blessed not only by Dad's earlier life, work, and passion, but blessed also to know that even in his fading and declining state he was still doing the work of the Christ.

Unbeknownst to us, the community that he shaped and was a part of at Watson Fields in Dover revealed itself those final two days of hospice care and vigil. The lives that he'd touched over the last year and a half among the many staff and residents there who grieved before, with, and after us—even the 104-year-old female resident who cried in our arms after his passing—were in full revelation.

While I'd initially hoped and personally prayed for a peaceful but accelerated passing, it was clear that Dad was not yet done! The opportunity given for his entire family to see him, and the two-day vigil that my mother, brother and I had with him provided us time to connect as a family of four in a manner that we hadn't been able to do in decades.

The stories, music (so much music!), laughter, tears, memories, reassurances, hopes, promises and words that we shared with, for, and about dad and each other were precious.

And we witnessed and felt, if ever so fleeting, a moment at the very time of his passing when we knew that everything that Dad had ever believed, lived, and preached became reality for him. Dad showed us, through his years of fading memory and dementia, and even in his final moment that death is **not** the victor. It was nothing but indescribably awesome.

Perhaps the cardinal in the tree and the two deer that made themselves known to us just after his death were reassurances from the mystery 'above' who was telling us, “Don't worry, I've got you all, and I've got him. And I can take it from here.”

For this I will be forever marked and grateful.”

Joseph Herbert Crocker carried the Good Shepherd's voice during his formal ministry. But the voice was not silenced even when Rev. Crocker's mind could not be involved. The voice of our true shepherd is not the voice of the mind and can only be heard when we still our minds and listen with the heart. And then, even without our minds, even when we walk into the valley of the shadow of death, we will know the voice when we hear it, and follow our shepherd home. Amen.