

Title: The Voice of the Good Shepherd

Text: Ezekiel 34:1-6, 15-16; John 10:2-5, 11-15

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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Why do we come to church? I suspect that if we could know all the hearts and minds of all the people in church today we would realize that there are a number of reasons why people might be in church this Sunday morning. Some might be in church because of a sense of duty.

I heard about a Chinese holy man who lived in a remote part of China. He was very poor, but had come to love God and worship God faithfully. As poor as he was, he understood that worship involves some sacrifice on our part. Food was his scarcest commodity, so every day before his quiet time of prayer and meditation he put a dish of butter up on the window sill as an offering to God. One day during this time, his cat came in and ate the butter. To remedy this, he began to tie the cat to the bedpost each day before his time of worship. In time this man was so revered for his piety that others joined him as his disciples and worshiped as he did. Generations later, long after the holy man was dead, his followers placed an offering of butter on the window sill during their time of prayer and meditation. Also, each one bought a cat and tied it to the bedpost. It was all part of the ritual.

I don't want to leave the impression that I'm against ritual; ritual has an important place in our lives and in worship, but ritual can become stale and lifeless. I'm sure there are those who come to church because it is a ritual and they come out of a sense of duty. That can be a good thing or not so good largely depending on the meaning we invest in it.

Some people go to church for the sake of their children. Maybe as adults the couple hadn't been to church in years, but now they have children, and they want their children to have some Christian values and so find their way back to a church or maybe to a church for the first time.

I would like to suggest today that one reason, a good reason to be part of a church, to be part of a faith community, is in order to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd call our name and lead us into the way of life.

I know that sometimes in the church the voice of the Good Shepherd can be muted. Donald Morgan served as Pastor of a church in Connecticut for many years. When he first came to the church and was just starting his ministry he passed a tourist on the sidewalk in front of the church building gazing at the structure, which was built in 1761. "Tell me," asked the tourist, "is that a church or a museum." Dr. Morgan admitted to being overcome

by the implications of that question. He responded, “I hope to God it is a church.” Sometimes the church can feel more like a museum filled with dead things.

And sometimes in the church the voice of the Good Shepherd can be distorted. The late Kenneth Chafin told about a relative of his, a delightful woman, who quit going to church because the church of which she was a member was such a killjoy. Some of the deacons would slip over to the high school the night of the Saturday dance and mark down all the young people of the church who were dancing. They would give the names to the Pastor who called them out from the pulpit on Sunday and embarrassed them. I can’t imagine a church doing that today, but there are many other ways a church can distort the voice of the Good Shepherd. We can distort the voice with our politics, our misconceptions about God, our sins and biases—there are many ways to distort the voice of Christ. There is no absolutely pure voice.

No church is perfect. The church is filled with imperfect people and we are all a little hard of hearing so we don’t hear the voice of the Good Shepherd clearly. The church can be like a hospital, filled with a lot of wounded people as it should be—the church should be in some ways be like a hospital bringing healing to hurting people. But of course, some hurting people have a tendency to hurt others, hurting people can be very bitter, and so we have some of that in the church.

The prophet Ezekiel reminds us, too, that there are false shepherds around who take care of themselves, but do not take care of the flock. They rule the sheep harshly for their own advantage. We have all read stories about church leaders who have taken advantage of the flock. And as John tells us there are hired hands pretend to care for the sheep but flee at the first sign of danger; they don’t really care for the flock either.

And whenever you get people together with different viewpoints and perspectives and different ideas about how things should go some degree of conflict occurs. There was a cartoon in a Christian journal where a note in the church newsletter read, “The Wednesday Bible study, Saturday Prayer Breakfast, Crib Nursery and Women’s Mission Society have declared their independence and will exist as a commonwealth with details regarding defense to be worked out at a later date.” Maybe you have heard the little ditty that a church member scribbled on a church bulletin one Sunday: “To dwell above, with the saints we love; Oh, that will be glory. But to dwell below, with the saints we know; Well, that’s a different story.”

And so it goes in the church. But I believe that it’s in church—and by church I don’t mean this building, this facility; I mean the faith community, the “in Christ” community that gathers to worship, serve, study, and pray—I believe in church, with all our imperfections and failures and shortcomings, in this gathering of imperfection—right here is where we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, the living Christ.

The church that is reflected and represented in the Gospel of John believed that the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for the sheep, was in their midst, speaking to them and guiding them. They believed that the way the living Christ did this was through the Spirit—whom they identified as the Spirit of Truth. Christ was not literally present, but he was spiritually present. They believed that the active presence and power of the living Christ was present in their community leading them and guiding them, changing and transforming them, healing and renewing them.

I wonder today how many of us really believe that—that even though we are sinful and imperfect, even though we sometimes distort and sometimes mute the voice of Christ, even though we are wounded and hurting and in our hurt wound others, that even though we are a ragged and tattered bunch—yet Christ, who gave his life for us, is present with us when we gather together in community. Do we believe that? Do we come together expecting to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd?

How can we discern that voice? After all the Scripture texts we read this morning warn about false shepherds and hired hands. How can we know when we hear the voice? Back in chapter 5 of John’s Gospel Jesus says, “the time has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.”

In this Gospel “death” and “life” are poignant, theologically charged and packed religious symbols. Death can represent all that is broken in our lives, it can represent the darkness of depression, the alienation and estrangement we experience from others, the absence of meaning in our lives, or the hate and bitterness and envy that can destroy others as well as ourselves.

The antithesis of death is life. Life is the symbol for that which is healthy and vibrant and whole. Life can represent the healing and new energy we experience when we let go of our anxieties and worries and fears; it can stand for the liberation that comes when we experience forgiveness and when get rid the resentment and animosity we allowed to fester inside of us; it can represent the freedom and joy that is ours when we choose to let go of all the guilt we have accumulated over the years or when we decide to make things right with someone we did wrong and hurt. Life is what happens to us when we open our hearts to the love of God and decide to share and spread that love around. Death is what happens to us when we close our hearts to God’s love and grace and choose not to forgive and love others.

We are gathered here today as a community of faith and the living Christ is here; his voice is speaking—through the prayers, through the songs, through the Scripture, through the teaching and preaching, and through the fellowship we have with each other. And the question is: Have we come expecting to hear and respond to that voice?

Two men were walking down Fifth Avenue in New York. One stopped suddenly and said, “I hear a cricket.” His friend scoffed. “How in the world can you hear a cricket on Fifth Avenue?” The first man explained that he was a naturalist and was trained to hear crickets, and to prove his point, he reached in his pocket and took out a fifty-cent piece and dropped it on the pavement. Ten people stopped dead in their tracks. We tend to hear what has meaning for us.

I wonder how many of us have trained ourselves to hear the voice of the one who brings life? Remember that passage in John 6 where after Jesus’ teaching most of his disciples quit. They found his teaching to be too difficult and they left. Then Jesus turned to the Twelve and said, “Are you going to leave too?” And they said, “Where would we go? You have the words of life.” Jesus, the living Christ in our midst, present with us, has the words of life.

Jesus says, “I am the good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me” and then he says something rather astounding. He compares the relationship he has with his followers with the relationship he has with the Father. “I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

Jesus invites his followers into an intimate relationship with himself and the Father. In the Old Testament there is that scene where the mountain quakes and the people are afraid, so they tell Moses to go and meet God for them; they are afraid of God and want no part of God. Jesus reveals to us that God is not be feared that way. That we can come into God’s presence and we are welcomed and loved and cared for the way a loving Mother or Father cares for their children.

I hope that we have come here today because we have a relationship with God and with Christ and we have come to hear his voice and be renewed and forgiven and reconciled—discovering new faith and hope and knowing in our hearts that we are loved. And if you don’t have a relationship with God what better place or time to begin one.

O God, as we eat this bread and drink this cup may we savor the relationship we have with you and open our hearts to your love and grace to receive your forgiveness, and just as we have received may we freely give to others.