

Sermon: Easter 4

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year C

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

When my former wife was pregnant with our daughter... we heard through *La Leche League*... about the importance of communicating with her *in utero*... about the importance of speaking to her... telling her stories... playing music for her... telling her that she was already our beloved... to let her know that she'd be welcomed into a new life outside of her current world... Jean spoke to Rachel... but it was easier for me to get closer... to put my face nearer to where she was... to create the kind of intimacy that only two faces... close to each other... can bring... I called her my own... and in some small way we bonded... and when Rachel was born... the very first time she heard me speak... she immediately turned her head in the direction of my voice... she knew it's sound... she knew who I was...

Today's Gospel makes us yearn to hear God's voice in this way too... we want God to speak directly to us... for God's face to be close to ours... for our eardrums to vibrate with the melody of God's love song... we want God to speak to us from a burning bush... we want God to speak to us from the clouds... even though some will say it was just thunder... we want to know God in the depth of sheer silence... and we want to be God's beloved sheep...

But these days... there are so many voices... it can be hard to know which one to listen to... which one to follow... when we don't know the voice that grounds us it can be hard to know just who the Good Shepherd is... the one who will come looking for us when we get lost... and these days... it can be easy to feel lost because so many of the systems which were created to protect us... have failed... because so many with power and authority are more like the thieves who get into the sheepfold in the dark... sometimes

literally passing hurtful legislation in the dark of night... snatching our safety and well-being from us...

But most of us don't want to be sheep... sheep are dim-witted... they're compliant followers of each other and of social convention... the images of sheep we have contradict our sense of ourselves as independent... the images of sheep we have contradict our own sense of self-determination... but sheep are like us... by nature they're wanderers... they're inquisitive... curious... that's why they need shepherds to go and find them when they get lost...

And one of the ways we get lost... is to pay more attention to the voices of the world... than to the still small voice of God within us... when we believe *judgment* more than we believe *redemption*... when we believe the voices of the world which yell *curses*... more than we believe *blessing*... more than we believe that we are God's beloved in whom God is well pleased...

And although we generally dislike the idea of having a shepherd... or a Big Brother or anyone looking over our shoulder... no matter how grown up we think we are... we need God's guidance... and no matter how much we like our independence... we can't do it alone... that's why we have community... and that's why we need the kind of shepherding that Jesus offers...

The pastoral imagery that Jesus uses today is based in Ezekiel 34... where the kings of Israel were the bad shepherds who endangered and exploited the flock... and where God is the good shepherd who rescues the sheep and places them in the care of God's servant David... that is... under the care of a restored monarchy...

But the Pharisees didn't quite get it... they thought of themselves as the shepherds... but they demonstrated that they didn't have the flock's best interest at heart... they drove out the man whose sight was restored by Jesus... and created confusion among

the sheep... but it was Jesus who showed himself to be the Good Shepherd when he healed the blind man... Jesus who comes to the flock... and to whom the sheep respond... many who came to Jesus didn't get it... because they were focused on myopic voices... instead of on listening to their own hearts...

The sense of hearing is one of the first senses we experience in the womb... and is... almost certainly... the last one we lose when we leave this world... it's no wonder Jesus uses the image of hearing... but it's not just a matter of listening to the words he speaks... it's also a matter of discerning just who the speaker is... and while we may get lost... while we may make mistakes... our Shepherd will guide us back... will redeem what's needed... and will make us and all things new...

John Shea wrote... as we make the Gospels our own... we begin to speak about what we are experiencing... at first... our voice may stumble and sound tentative... we may worry that we don't sound orthodox enough... or we may compare ourselves to others who seem fluent in spiritual talk about Jesus... finding our own voice doesn't mean that we don't learn from others... but parroting what we don't understand will not help our faith development either... we must trust our own path and the provisional yet real voice that is emerging... and when it comes to speaking in our own voice... there is a Jewish spiritual story worth repeating...

When Rabbi Zusya grew old and knew that his time on earth was nearing a close... his students gathered around him... one of them asked him if he was afraid of dying... *I am afraid of what God will ask me*... the rabbi said... *What will he ask you*... they wondered... *He will not ask me Zusya... why were you not like Moses... he will ask me Zusya... why were you not like Zusya*...

The Rev. G. Cole Gruberth wrote: *In the end... our only wisdom is to know our shepherd's voice... our one skill as sheep is to listen... to listen from the deep place in*

which we recognize that Jesus doesn't call us to become something different... but calls us to grow into who we truly are... and whose we truly are...

In today's Gospel... Jesus says about us... what our children might say about us... his sheep hear his voice... he knows them and they follow him... but then he says what we can't... that he gives us eternal life... that we will never perish... and that no one will snatch us out of his hand...

So let's tune our own ears to listen for how the Good Shepherd speaks to us... to trust our gut... to know that although we're members of one body... each one of us is also unique... and to know that although we're invited into relationship and communion... it's our uniqueness which informs our path... these are not mutually exclusive... let's learn the sound of Jesus' inner voice so well that when we hear it... we immediately turn our heads in it's direction... and know God... we all want to be the beloved sheep... the one God comes after... and the truth is... we are... because we are loved just as we are and for just who we are... the dim-witted... compliant followers of each other and of social convention... sheep who are not as independent as we'd like to believe we are... and when we leave the womb that we're in now... we'll be born again into a new and eternal life... and our sense of hearing will be fully restored... and we'll all recognize God's voice... and God's love... the love of a parent for their children...

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