

“The Voice of the Shepherd”

Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Almighty God, through your only Son you overcame death and opened to us the light of eternity. Enlighten our minds and kindle our hearts with the presence of your Spirit, that we may hear your words of comfort and challenge for us today, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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I’m getting tired of seeing peoples’ faces. I mean, I see peoples’ faces from an acceptable social distance but with a mask, I only see the eyes and forehead. I am getting good at reading people’s eye brows?

There is a thing called Zoom Fatigue. And, oh yes, researchers are studying it.

A researcher at Stanford University suggests that “during in-person meetings, people aren’t staring into your face from a close distance — some might be typing up notes, some might be reading, but video calls disrupt that natural rhythm, forcing everyone logged in to stare at each other, a phenomenon known as “hyper gaze.”

Like many of you, I have been on my fair share of ZOOM meetings during the last year where one or more people are (I’ll say it nicely) video camera-challenged. The angle of the camera is slightly askew, either focused on one’s forehead, or awkwardly pointed down so you don’t even see their face, or just extremely, extremely close to one’s nose.

The researcher suggests that: “From an evolutionary standpoint, if somebody was very close to you and staring right at you, this meant you were going to mate or get in a fight.” Well, as you can tell that creates a large amount of stress.¹ People are on high alert.

During in-person meetings, people also don’t feel the need to exaggerate their nonverbal behavior – nodding, thumbs up, clapping – nor are people forced to stare at themselves. Again, video calls upend those norms.

So in the last few weeks, I’ve rediscovered the telephone! There is something comforting again about focusing on someone’s voice. Listening to someone’s voice over the phone – whom you cannot see close up – has new significance for me. It gets me to put the focus on the conversation. I think of the phone call shared with a good friend just this past Friday. Her friendship has sustained me through the most difficult parts of my life. I remember what she looks like, her voice is familiar. Her voice is engaging and encouraging. It’s a trusted voice.

It’s comforting, isn’t it, just to hear a familiar voice?

Our text this morning from the gospel of John is part of a longer discourse one of Jesus’ ‘I AM’ statements. “I AM the Good Shepherd.”

This reflects the imagery of the Good Shepherd. A shepherd is one whose voice is known and followed by the sheep in his care.

There of course is a problem, here. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, representing the Lord who is our shepherd, then who are we? As Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, “We are the sheep, the wooly ones.”²

Jesus said: “I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.” There is a bond that exists between the sheep and the shepherd. The relationship grows and usually the shepherd and sheep develop a way of communicating that others do not understand.

Sheep will not go anywhere if the shepherd does not go first. They need a shepherd who will go ahead of them to show them that things are alright and that they’ll be safe and cared for.

That’s all we really want and need, right? To know that we are safe and cared for. To know that our loved ones are safe and cared for. To know that all of God’s children in this city and on the earth are safe and cared for.

That notion of safety and security is certainly being put to the test. It has been quite a week. We search for a familiar voice and comforting words reminding us of God’s unwavering and loving care for each of us.

Who has been a comforting voice in this time of unrest?

You may know someone who provides a calm and comforting presence. You may be that person for someone else. Maybe you turn to a podcast with a speaker who has a soothing voice. Maybe you turn on some smooth jazz. Maybe you turn to scripture and the collection of Psalms for comfort in these times. Perhaps the melody that Jamie sang a few moments ago reminds us of a calm and comforting presence.

The verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial was announced this past Tuesday in the murder of George Floyd. For some, there was relief, for others, cautious optimism. For others, there is still pessimism

that it took so long and another black person had to die to come to a potential turning point in our justice system.

But in the 24 hours immediately around Tuesday's verdict six more police shootings happened across our country.³ The current public health epidemic of gun violence on our streets and across our country does not cease.

One of the six police involved shootings was in our city. Another black child of God was killed on our streets. On our city streets. We say her name, Ma'Khia Bryant, 16 years old, killed by a Columbus Police officer. Unfortunately, in our city, this is not new. Three black men have been killed by police since December 4, 2020; Casey Goodson, Jr., Andre Hill, Miles Jackson. Four more black souls at the hands of Columbus Police. Family and friends, the whole community left in the wake of tragedy yet again.

People in our city, especially, people of color in our city are on high alert. Tensions are high. We long to hear the voice of one who will lead us beside still waters instead of the raging torrent in recent months. We strain for comforting words to restore our souls. But instead, we hear distracting voices; providing dissonance instead of clarity. It makes it hard to hear the voice of a shepherd.

After the week we've had, I don't think there's a substitute for the feeling of security that comes from knowing you're the object of someone's constant care and concern. It's comforting to hear a familiar voice.

In times when anxiety and fear hold us more than patience and courage, we need to be reassured that someone will not only journey with us, but they will go first to lead.

New Testament Scholar Matt Skinner suggests “maybe one way to understand the calming presence of a good shepherd’s care is to experience the distress caused by its absence. We’re seeing that, yet again, when the people and systems we employ to shepherd our public safety fail to protect and serve Black bodies.”⁴

When a greedy wolf shows up or an opportunistic hired hand runs the other direction, you know it. Your whole body experiences the threat. Feelings of terror, worry, and abandonment get embedded in our bones and systems.

He suggests, “there are too many toxic effects of lacking a good shepherd.”

- The lingering effects of narcissistic and deceitful political leadership.
- The pandemic-fueled anxiety dreams.
- Nowhere to hide from the predatory racism that roams the streets.
- The flood of microaggressions in daily life.

This is too much the generational experience of our black and brown siblings who do not feel safe on our streets.

When we are aware of the absence of shepherd’s care, we are called to gather as a community, to pray, to listen for a way forward, identifying the one whose voice is known and trusted.

The image of shepherd and sheep is very central to the narrative that we tell about the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ and that we teach to our children.

It's comforting, isn't it, to hear a familiar voice. A trusted shepherd seeks the welfare of the flock and seeks to lead the flock in God's ways towards God's good future.

We can recall that part of the reason the sheep trust the voice of the shepherd is because they know she will always go first. The sheep know the shepherd will always experience the journey before they do, so that the sheep have no need to fear being abandoned or purposefully led into danger. The shepherd never leads the sheep to a place that she, herself, has not been, has not experienced, has not touched or walked first.

I like how Rev. Shannon Kershner describes this. "That," she says, "that is incarnation, God becoming flesh and blood in a baby, born into this world through a woman. That is crucifixion, God experiencing betrayal and suffering and death firsthand, not escaping it but willingly entering into it. That is resurrection, God wrenching forth new life out of old, new possibility out of tragedy, refusing to let death have the last word and emptying it of its power. This picture of Jesus Christ as our Good Shepherd reminds us that he will always lead us on the right paths that he has already walked."⁵

This is what we claim as people who follow God in the Way of Jesus, as Easter people. We claim that in Jesus Christ all of life and death has been hallowed, made holy. We claim that our Good Shepherd has traveled all the paths we will take in our lives. Our Good Shepherd has already experienced the journey firsthand so that we can be assured of God's presence on our way.

Jesus knows you by name. The one who calls you and leads you out. The one who created you and abides within you and will not forsake you, especially not in these days of chaos and uncertainty

and loneliness. I am the good shepherd, Jesus says, the one who lays down his own life for the sheep.

One more interesting image that emerges from this text before we finish. This passage is often used as a tool for exclude people in the name of Jesus. It's often used to support an argument about whom God saves and therefore whom God does not save; who goes into the fold and who doesn't. The sheep are never in charge of who gets to go through.

The shepherd is the only one who can call the flock together, who forms them into sheep family, and who leads them wherever they are to go. The sheep are just brought into a flock. They must simply learn how to abide with each other and live together.

Interesting, isn't it. It is not the sheep's decision whom God chooses. Those decisions are up to the Shepherd and, a few verses later Jesus declares he has other sheep that are not even a part of this particular fold. Thus it would not surprise me one bit if our Shepherd has a much bigger flock than any of us can even imagine, a pasture big enough for everyone to find a place to graze.

It is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who leads us into the future. That future is uncertain. We know bad things happen. This week is full of evidence of that. There may be other tough weeks ahead. But listen to the Good News as we continue our journey with God, the journey God has in store for you and for me. We go forward with the assurance that we are not traveling alone. This Shepherd never leaves us alone. When we walk through life's darkest valley, in the shadows, God will be with us, never to abandon us or leave us to our own devices. God offers protection, comfort and, somewhat surprisingly, abundance.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/zoom-fatigue-burn-out-gender.html>.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*. (1993) pp 140-146.

³ <https://apnews.com/article/columbus-shootings-death-of-george-floyd-racial-injustice-arrests-89cc1cbfd8d7e452c4b4670e319cdfa9>.

⁴ Matt Skinner, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/shepherding>.

⁵ Rev. Shannon Kershner, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2020/050320.html>.