

“The Flock’s Investigation: The Voice of the Good Shepherd”
John 10:1-10

We begin today a new sermon series based on the movie, *The Sheep Detectives*. The story is that of a shepherd who loves his sheep, but who ends up being murdered. When the sheep discover what had happened to him, they step out of their comfort zone to help investigate his murder. Through a lot of fun twists and turns, they manage to expose the killer and all the greed that had infested others. It is a fun movie which also holds a lot of depth underneath its humor. There are so many parallels to the Christian story and Jesus’ image of himself as the Good Shepherd.

Today, we focus on the connection between the sheep and the shepherd, especially the connection to the voice. One of the things the shepherd, George, in *The Sheep Detectives* did was read murder mysteries to his flock every evening: <https://youtu.be/BYCX-p35neY>. Even though his sheep had developed a technique for erasing their memory whenever life got tough, they never forgot his voice and their bond to him. They knew his voice because they spent time together. He always showed up for them. His voice left a mark on their lives which guided them even after he was gone from their midst.

In the same way, Jesus spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd who was known to his sheep. His voice is different than all the other voices around them. His voice leads them to the abundant life. Let’s listen to John 10:1–10:

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Our Gospel reading this morning talks about Jesus as the Good Shepherd who brings us fullness of life. But the fullness of life to which Jesus calls us is not about a life that does not have suffering or pain in it. It is a life that is filled with the presence of the Spirit and our deep connection to God and others in the midst of our struggles and pain.

The disciples and the people of that region would understand sheep and shepherds because this was their way of life. One of the things people often see in that region, even today, are shepherds guiding their sheep to green pastures to eat because such pastures were hard to come by in the arid terrain of the area. Shepherds needed to find grazing land for their flocks, which meant leaving their homes to devote themselves to caring for the sheep in their charge. This image of the shepherd carries a lot of biblical weight because God is seen as the shepherd. Also, the first king of ancient Israel, David, was a shepherd.

One key element in the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd is the deep bond they share. The sheep recognize their shepherd and are able to follow where they lead them. Sheep without their shepherd easily get lost.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

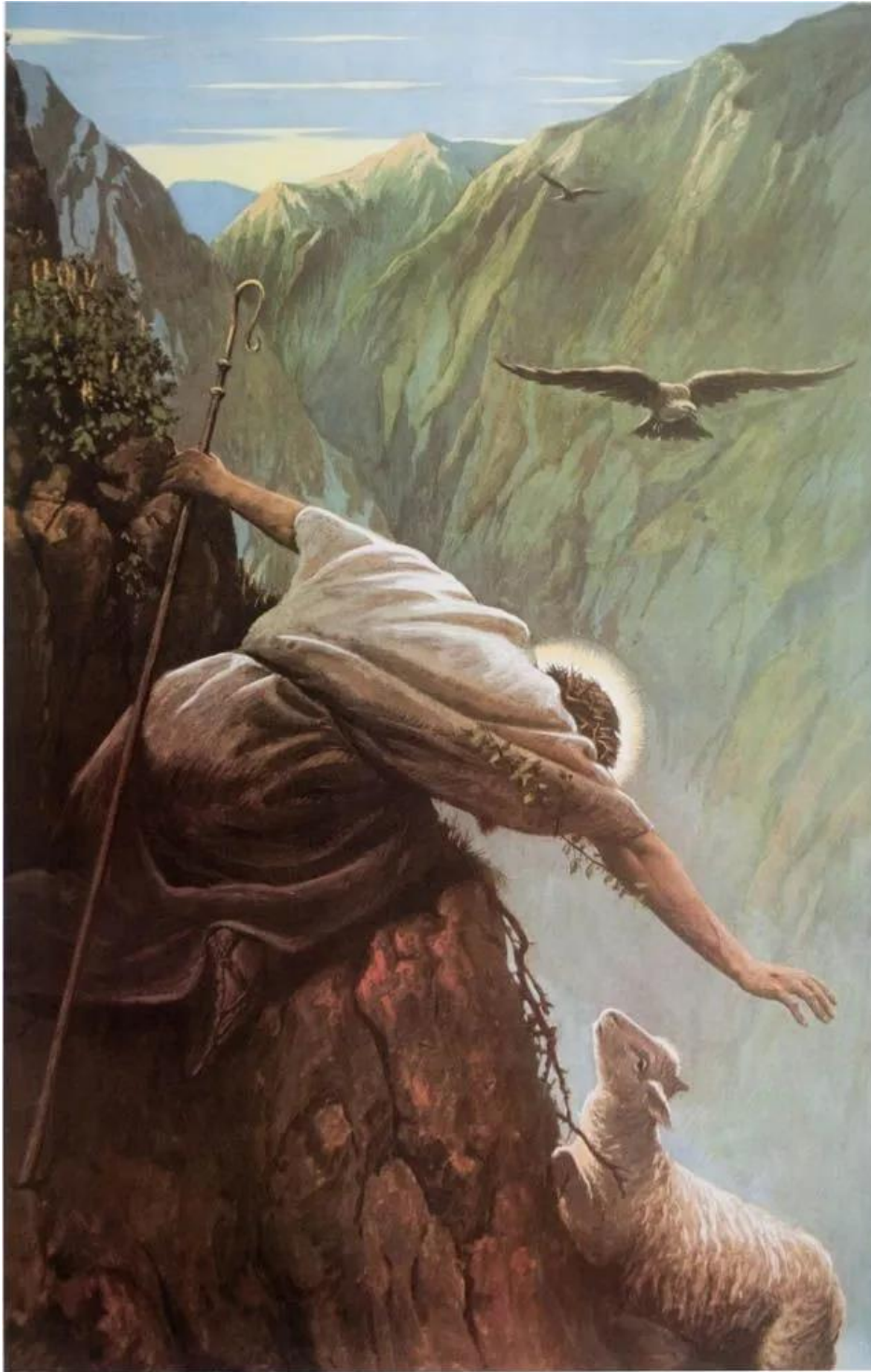
"Sheep seem to consider the shepherd to be not just their leader but a part of their sheep family... The shepherd and the sheep even develop a language of their own. Like a parent of a newborn child, the attentive shepherd learns to recognize the difference between a bleat of pain and a bleat of pleasure."

Consider in life all the voices that seek our attention and often end up confusing us about our own truth and purpose in life. There are the voices of politicians often misleading us into rage against the other side and even our own neighbors. There are the voices of advertisers telling us that our current life is not good enough and that we always need more, leaving us feeling like we are not enough. There are voices in the media that present certain images of how we should look or be which often leave us feeling inadequate. There are voices that just distract us and send us in thousands of directions leaving us exhausted. There are inner voices that are critical of us and of others and are never satisfied and which always leave chasing the illusion of perfection.

But when we learn to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd in our lives, all the other pieces fall into place. "But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matthew 6:33

Look at this famous painting by English artist Alfred Usher Soord, titled *The Lost Sheep*. This painting is based on another scripture where Jesus gave a parable about a lost

sheep and the shepherd leave the 99 sheep to look for the one that is lost (Matthew 18 and Luke 15).



Notice where the sheep has ended up. It stands stranded on a narrow, precarious ledge jutting out over a vast chasm. Birds of prey circle overhead, waiting for the inevitable

fall. The sheep cannot climb up, and it cannot leap across. It is completely helpless, cornered by its own missteps and the dangerous landscape around it. Now look at the Shepherd.

Jesus isn't standing safely on the high ground calling down instructions or scolding the sheep for straying. He is lying flat on the jagged rock, straining his body to its absolute limit over the abyss. He risks his own safety, reaching down into the shadow of death so his hand can reach the vulnerable creature below.

Notice, too, the expression on the sheep's face. It isn't staring at the vultures, and it isn't looking down at the drop beneath its feet. It has turned its head straight upward toward the Shepherd. Why? Because even in the terrifying noise of the wind and the screeching eagles, it recognized the call of its owner. It heard the voice calling its name, and it looked up.

This image brings John 10 into vivid focus. The world is full of thief-like voices - voices of fear, distraction, self-doubt, and outrage—that threaten to push us off the edge. Sometimes we wander off-track and end up in places where we feel trapped, exhausted, and isolated.

Yet the Good Shepherd does not abandon us to the chasm. He goes to great lengths—even to the cross itself—to reach us in our deepest distress. His voice cuts through the wind and the noise, calling out to us, reminding us that we belong to him.

Like the flock in *The Sheep Detectives* who never forgot George's voice, or the solitary lamb on Soord's cliffside, our hope does not lie in figuring out the terrain on our own. Our hope lies in tuning our ears to the one voice that reaches for us.

When you feel lost, overwhelmed, or surrounded by competing demands, quiet the noise around you. Listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, look up and look within, and let him lead you back to life abundant. **Amen.**