

Happy Good Shepherd Sunday everyone! I am glad to see that we have already separated ourselves into groups of sheep and goats. I will let you decide which half of the sanctuary is which.

Today from the Gospel of John, in this familiar and beloved passage, Jesus speaks about the Good Shepherd. He sets up a contrast between the shepherd who cares for the sheep and those who come only to harm them. The Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name. His voice is known to them. It is steady, trustworthy, and life giving. He leads them gently toward safety and toward abundance. In contrast, the thief and the bandit come only to steal, to kill, and to destroy. Their voices are not known. Their intentions are not good. And so the sheep run from them.

We often read this passage and quickly identify Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and rightly so. Yet even within the text there is a kind of mystery. Jesus speaks of the gatekeeper, of the voice, of the one who calls. There is a depth here that points to both his humanity and his divinity, to his relationship with God, and to the presence of God as shepherd over all. It is rich and complex, and perhaps not something we can fully resolve.

So rather than trying to untangle all of that, I want to focus on something that feels very immediate and very real for us today. I want to focus on the voice.

Because at the heart of this passage is a simple but challenging claim. The sheep know the voice of the shepherd. They recognize it. They follow it. And they turn away from the voices that would lead them astray.

If only it were that simple for us.

Because the truth is, we live in a world filled with voices. Some are loud. Some are persuasive. Some are constant. And many of them are calling out to us, asking for our attention, asking for our loyalty, asking us to set aside our values, asking us to follow without question.

And it is not always easy to tell which voice is which.

Sometimes, of course, things are clear. Sometimes right and wrong feel obvious. A memory came to me of the early days of the pandemic. Like many families, we were adjusting to a new rhythm of life. The kids were in online classes, using our laptops throughout the day.

One afternoon, after my son had been using my computer, I went to retrieve it because I needed to get some work done. And when I picked it up, I discovered that someone had drawn all over the top of it with red crayon.

Now both kids were in the same room, so I asked, as calmly as I could, "Which one of you drew on my computer?" Silence. No response at all. It seemed that my voice was not particularly compelling in that moment.

So I asked again, a little louder. Still nothing.

At that point, I will admit, this shepherd was not feeling especially good. So I raised my voice and said, "Children, listen, who drew on my laptop?" Pearse looked at me and said, "Daddy, you do not have to yell."

Phewww.

I took a breath and tried again. And just then my wife walked into the room to see what all the noise was about. Pearse said very plainly, "Connolly did it." I turned to Connolly, who at three and a half had now positioned herself safely behind Ashley, and I asked gently, "Did you draw on my laptop?"

"No," came the reply.

“Then who did?” I asked.

“Mommy did.”

At that point it became very difficult not to laugh, as she continued to insist that it was in fact Ashley who had decorated my computer.

In that moment, this sheep did not quite believe the voice he was hearing.

It is a simple story, but it points to something true. Even in our own homes, even in ordinary moments, we experience how difficult it can be to discern truth, to recognize what is real, to know which voice to trust.

And if that is true in something as small as a child’s explanation about a laptop, how much more true is it in the larger and more complex realities of our world?

Continuing with that theme, we saw that clearly during the pandemic. There were so many voices speaking at once. Voices telling us what was happening, what it meant, and how we should respond. Some called for caution and care. Others called for speed and reopening. Some emphasized collective responsibility. Others emphasized personal freedom. Even today those voices continue to challenge the decisions, writing them off as coercive and damaging, questioning the medical field, and using it to undermine conventional wisdom about vaccines.

It was not always easy to know which voice to follow.

And in the midst of that, there were also quieter voices. Voices that did not always make headlines, but that spoke truth in a different way. One of those voices, for me, was that of Dr. Lorna Breen, a physician who worked at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, who under the strain of hopelessness in those early days of the pandemic took her own life. Her death revealed something of the weight and the strain carried by those who were caring for others in the most intense moments of that crisis.

Her story was not loud in the usual sense. It was not about argument or opinion. But it spoke powerfully about the cost of care, about the reality of suffering, and about the need to pay attention to those who are carrying burdens we may not fully see.

And that brings us to now.

Because even though that particular season has passed, thank God, the challenge remains the same. We are still surrounded by voices. We are still asked, every day, to decide what we will listen to, and what we will follow.

Here in British Columbia, we can see this very clearly.

There are loud voices that shape how we think about the world. Voices that tell us success is measured only in productivity and growth. Voices that encourage us to prioritize our own comfort above all else. Voices that reduce complex human realities into simple categories, making it easier to ignore what is difficult or uncomfortable.

There are loud voices when it comes to the land and the climate. Voices that downplay the urgency of what we have experienced in recent years, even as communities have faced devastating fires, floods, and heat. These voices can be confident and reassuring, but they can also lead us away from responsibility and care.

There are loud voices when it comes to our relationships with Indigenous peoples. Voices that resist tell the story of that complex relationship, that grow impatient with the work of reconciliation, that would rather move on than sit with the weight of history and its ongoing effects. These voices can sound reasonable on the surface, but they often ask us to ignore pain that is still very present and still being lived out.

There are loud voices when it comes to those who are unhoused, especially in places like Vancouver or even our own Nanaimo. Voices that frame people as

problems to be managed rather than neighbors to be loved. Voices that make it easier to look away, to walk past, to keep distance.

These are the kinds of voices that fill our world. And yes, far beyond BC these voices push and pull violently. They drag us into conflicts and set us against each other. They are persistent. They are often forceful. And over time, they can begin to sound normal.

But they are not the only voices.

There are also quieter voices. Voices that do not demand attention, but invite it. Voices that echo the teachings of Christ.

There are the voices of those who speak for the land, who remind us that creation is not simply a resource, but a gift entrusted to our care. There are voices calling us to live differently, to think not only of today, but of generations yet to come.

There are the voices of those who continue to speak truth about justice and reconciliation, who like Jesus draw us to meet one another at the table even when we disagree. Voices that ask us to listen, to learn, and to be willing to change.

These voices are not always comfortable, but they are grounded in a deep longing for healing and right relationship.

There are the voices of those who work quietly among the poor and the unhoused. People who offer food, shelter, presence, and dignity. People who see individuals where others see inconvenience. People who remind us, simply by the way they live, that every person has worth and is a valued child of God.

And often, these voices are easy to miss.

Because they do not shout. They do not compete in the same way. They require us to slow down, to pay attention, to listen more carefully, and even set aside our own big opinions.

And that is where this passage speaks so directly to us. Because the call of the Good Shepherd is not only about following. It is first about listening. It is about learning to recognize a voice that is consistent with love, with mercy, with compassion, and with truth.

It is about noticing where life is being nurtured, where dignity is being upheld, where care is being extended. It is about allowing those quieter voices to have the room to shape us, even when louder ones are trying to pull us in other directions.

The Good Shepherd does not drive the sheep. He calls them. He knows them.  
And his voice leads them toward life. Beloved, there are many voices in our world.  
Some will lead toward fear. Some toward division. Some toward indifference.

But there is also a voice that leads toward love.

A voice that calls us to care for one another. A voice that calls us to stand with  
those who suffer. A voice that calls us to act with humility and with courage.

That is the voice we are invited to follow.

So may we learn to listen for it. May we learn to recognize it. And when we hear it,  
may we have the courage to follow where it leads.

Amen.