

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 3, 2020  
Sermon preached by The Rev. Kyle Wagner  
Rector, Christ Church, Dartmouth

“Like Lost Sheep?”

**A**s we continue to navigate our isolation in the wake of COVID-19, we here in Nova Scotia continue to experience great loss and grief. Again, we are reminded about how precious life is, as we pray for those who have died and are lost at sea after the helicopter crash of this past week in Greece. We give thanks for our men and women in uniform as they serve to protect us, for our freedoms, and democracy. We continue to pray for those on the frontlines and those who have died because of the virus. And as we say Nova Scotia strong, perhaps we can also admit the times when we are weak.

It's been a week where I think the isolation is getting to us. At least that is what I am hearing. We are doing different things. The other day as I got groceries, I purchased a Nova Scotia flag. This week I have had to have a conversation with my oldest son about “the bad guys.” Elijah idolizes a dear friend of mine who is a police officer in the HRM. My boy is concerned about the recent shootings, at the age of five, he has a plan if our home is threatened. What strange times we live in. In talking to my son, I repeated the often-quoted message from Mr. Rogers, who said, *“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”*

Today's readings give us time to pause as we continue in our Easter journey. Often called “Good Shepherd Sunday,” our Gospel is the parable of the shepherd and his sheep. For many rural folks, this story is easily understood, but for others, one may say, “sheep can be called?” Certainly. When I was in Israel, I saw this firsthand, and it was quite beautiful.

You see, the sheep know their shepherd because of the voice. They know the noise, the cadence of the language. Even God reaches us through the word. This being said, this process of knowing the master is not just instinct. The sheep must understand the nature of the shepherd's voice. It actually takes time for the sheep to figure out the sinus cavities, vocal cords, inflective patterns, and melodic curvature of their caregiver.

**I**nterestingly shepherds and sheep learn quickly that the path to their mutual success depends on tending to the flock but caring for the individual. Like humans living in collectivity, shepherds are called to provide clean water, ample forage and shelter to an entire herd to maintain good health. But the success of a shepherd or shepherdess is the compassion they have for each individual. It means that the shepherd needs to identify a sick or injured sheep or lamb within a flock of hundreds of sheep. Assisting with the birth of a lamb when needed, caring for a lamb orphaned by its mother, providing the expectant mother with nutrition or compassionately weaning a lamb are all part of the shepherd's job. The more concern the shepherd has for the individuals who need health care, supplemental food assistance or individual attention, the healthier the flock and the more profitable the whole operation is.

*Should society not treat one another as sheep?* Perhaps it would be a good idea. Maybe we should know each other by name. I think when we arise from the darkness of COVID-19, we might take better care of our neighbours, entering a relationship that is intentional, not superficial or for our own benefit.

The long and short of today's message is quite simple: Jesus knows us and has come to call us by name. In the gospel, we consistently hear Jesus calling his friends. In John 20, Mary hears the Lord say, "Mary!" and in John 11, Lazarus hears his name in the tomb "Lazarus, come out!" We might even hear God's voice when we receive Holy Communion, "the body of Christ given for you."

**H**earing is a gift. And we must recognize that not all of us can hear, and so society must be mindful of our responsibility to make sure we can connect to all of God's people. Scientifically, people hear when sound waves enter the ear, move down the ear or auditory canal, and hit the eardrum, which then vibrates. The vibrations from the eardrum pass to three bones known as the ossicles in the middle ear, which then amplify the vibrations, which are then picked up by small hair-like cells in the cochlea. These move as the vibrations hit them, and the movement data is sent through the auditory nerve to the brain. The brain processes the data, which a person with functional hearing will interpret as sound.

Today, statistics are revealing that there is a decrease in hearing ability in some populations. Because of our loud contemporary life, people find it hard to listen to the important voices in the world. We are stuck to our smartphone devices, head down, no words spoken, only a sigh and a laugh every so often. We are distracted by sounds that compete for our attention, noise that separates us from God. We are so lost in our thoughts, that we fail to recognize that thieves and bandits try and tell us to bypass the gate because it's easier. We hear in Isaiah that we or like a sheep that has gone missing when it comes to our relationship with each other. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." -Isaiah 53:6

We are a society where Jesus' voice is compared to a multitude of voices that we encounter every day. These voices are selling us what we want, whenever we want. These voices include facts, and these voices are often muzzled by fake news and misdirection—voices of suffering, voices of pain, voices in isolation. Yet, Jesus' message in our reading today should give us pause and should provide us with some comfort. You see, for many Christians, knowing who Jesus is vital to the Christian life. Having a personal relationship with Jesus may seem too evangelical for Anglicans, but I think it is critical. You see, we are named, and we are loved. At times in our lives, we are brought into the sheepfold, into the safety of God. We listen to the voice. Sometimes the voice comforts us in our hardships and our rejections. For centuries Christians have taken comfort in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*"

**O**ne of the things we could focus on during this time of isolation is doors. Gates or doors which mark a barrier. They serve as protection, but as we well know today, they can serve as an obstacle between one another. Doors can even express anger, as the slamming of the door denotes something that might be wrong. Today, we are yearning for the day that our doors can be flown open so we can invite the world in again. Right now, our doors

are closed shut in fear to provided comfort from the virus. What a glorious day it will be when we can open them again in joy.

As we need encouragement at this time, and as we have learned the parable of the Good Shepherd, I'd like to leave you with a story about frogs. Yes frogs.

As a group of frogs was traveling through the woods, two of them fell into a deep pit. When the other frogs crowded around the pit and saw how deep it was, they told the two frogs that there was no hope left for them.

However, the two frogs decided to ignore what the others were saying and they proceeded to try and jump out of the pit.

Despite their efforts, the group of frogs at the top of the pit were still saying that they should just give up. That they would never make it out.

Eventually, one of the frogs took heed to what the others were saying and he gave up, falling down to his death. The other frog continued to jump as hard as he could. Again, the crowd of frogs yelled at him to stop the pain and just die.

He jumped even harder and finally made it out. When he got out, the other frogs said, "Did you not hear us?"

The frog explained to them that he was deaf. He thought they were encouraging him the entire time.

**M**y friends we are called at this time to know that God is with us, guiding us, shepherding us as we roam in the wilderness of isolation. We listen for the voice that leads us. But we also remember our reasonability to the herd, to the community that there are many ways that we can support one another, and for that we give thanks. AMEN.