

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, UT

Sermon

"A Familiar Voice"

May 15, 2011

Acts 2:36-41; 1 Peter 2:21-25; John 10:1-16

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Calvin can pretty reliably be counted on to do the opposite of whatever his parents tell him to do. Sheep are kind of that way, too.

Last year our family attended the annual sheep parade for the first time. We happened to be watching from right in front of Bulloch's drug store, where that pedestrian island sits in the middle of Main Street. There were a dozen or so spectators camped out on that island.

The sheep were moving very predictably and reliably northward until they encountered people right in the middle of their path. They stopped altogether. The shepherds must have worked for close to ten minutes to get the silly sheep started again. Some of them turned around and headed south. Some of them were hopping over each other to go south or north, whichever way seemed at the time to be the best way. Finally the shepherds cleared the pedestrian island of its human obstacles, and the sheep started reluctantly on their journey northwards.

You well know that first century Palestine was a primarily agrarian society. Jesus told so many parables about fishing and wheat and sheep and grape vines and so on. Here in today's reading from John, he relies once again on images and situations that would have been very familiar to his listeners. They are also somewhat familiar to us, as well, because our town is surrounded by sheep, sheep pastures, and shepherds.

As always, it is extremely worthwhile to set this story about shepherds and sheep gates into its context. We looked at chapter 9 in John's gospel only a little over a month ago, so that passage will hopefully be still fresh in your mind. Jesus goes to the temple and encounters there a man who has been blind since the time of his birth. Jesus takes pity on this man, makes some mud from his own spit and some dirt, spreads the mud on the man's eyes, and tells him to go wash in the nearby pool of Siloam. When the man does so, his sight is restored.

You may remember, or be able to anticipate the problem with this act of compassion and restoration. Jesus gives this man his sight on the sabbath day, and the Pharisees are, as usual, not happy campers. To heal on the sabbath is a violation of the Law of Moses, and cannot be countenanced, according to these super-pious authorities.

So the Pharisees call the man in and question him about what happened. They're not satisfied with what they hear from him, so they call in the man's parents. They're not satisfied with what they hear from the parents, so they call the man back in again. By this time the formerly blind man is becoming more than a little put out with the temerity and obvious guile of the Pharisees, and he gets a little testy with them. They ban him from participation in the work and fellowship of the synagogue.

Jesus has a conversation with the man after these things, and tells him that he, Jesus, is the Son of Man, the Anointed One of God. Then Jesus tells the man, in the presence of the Pharisees themselves, that he has come so that those who do not see may come to see, and so that those who claim to see may become blind. The Pharisees take offense, asking, "We are not blind, are we?" Jesus replies, "If you were blind, you would have no sin, but because you claim to see, your sin remains." Read this exchange in John 9:35-41.

Then Jesus launches into this passage about shepherds and gates and thieves and bandits. The Pharisees are still present, but others are also there. The basic point of the lesson, set in the context of his conflict with the Pharisees, is pretty clear: they are the thieves and the bandits. He is the gate and the good shepherd. But as is always the case in John's gospel, the teaching goes much deeper than just what appears on the surface.

The passage is structured in a rather odd way, but that oddness has a purpose. Jesus first casts himself as the good shepherd, then the gate for the sheep, then the good shepherd once again. Here are some of the things Jesus says. The shepherd calls his sheep by name; they follow him out of the sheep pen because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger whose voice they do not know.

Then Jesus changes his metaphor: he becomes the gate of the sheep pen. Those who enter and leave through him will be saved, will go out and find rich pasture. On the other hand, the thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy.

"I AM" the gate, Jesus tells those who are listening. Another one of those famous "I AM" sayings in John's gospel, intended to remind us that the one speaking is not just a man, but the one who is identified in John chapter one as the Word who was with God always, and who indeed IS God. "I AM" – God's words to Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus says at various points in John's gospel, I AM the bread of life, I AM the way, the truth and the life, I AM the light of the world, I AM the resurrection and the life. And here: I AM the gate for the sheep, the way by which they are saved and find pasture.

Then, he says, "I came so that the sheep may have life, and have it abundantly." We'll come back to that very shortly.

Jesus then returns to the metaphor of himself as the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. I AM the good shepherd, he says. Another occurrence of his self-identification with God. Now he compares himself with a hired hand who runs away when the wolf threatens the sheep. Once again, the hired hand is supposed to be directly identified with the Pharisees and other religious authorities. The hired hand runs away because he doesn't really care for the sheep, Jesus says. So the wolf snatches and scatters them.

On the other hand, Jesus knows those who belong to him, and they in turn know him, just as he knows the Father, and the Father knows him. And he lays down his life for the sheep.

During this season of Easter we remember that he did indeed lay down his life. More importantly, we remember that his Father restored that life to him, and that he lives to this day, still calling his sheep.

The thieves and bandits are still running around. These are the ones who pull the sheep away from the abundant life that Jesus promises. To listen to some of them, you would think that the abundant life consists of riches and wealth, and that these things are the ultimate goal of Christian faith and practice. I believe the gospels and the Bible as a whole teach a different lesson. In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells his followers that they can't worship both God and money, and that they are to be storing up treasure in heaven rather than on earth. Watch out for the thieves and bandits who proclaim that God promises wealth and prosperity, for they do not care for the sheep.

There was this riveting story in yesterday's Salt Lake Tribune, about one Harold Camping who claims that we have less than one week before Jesus returns. The day is May 21, next Saturday, according to Mr. Camping. He has worked this date out from calculations based on his estimate of the date of Noah's flood, and some obscure predictions in Genesis, and more speculation. By the way, his first prediction of the return of Jesus was in 1994. Camping allows that he made an error in those calculations.

Never mind that Jesus tells us that no one knows the day or the hour. Mr. Camping has an answer to that, as well. It would be decidedly un-Christian of me to identify Harold Camping as one of the thieves and bandits, so I'll leave the decision to you. I do wonder if we are meant to be prognosticating and predicting, or if we are instead simply to be faithfully living the life of faith, testifying to Jesus in what we say and do, and demonstrating his love. If you read the end-times texts in the gospels, you will find that they often contain themes that we are to be ready for Jesus to return, which I think means just these things: serving our church, our community, and the world in his name. That's what it means to be ready.

Well, you get the idea. There are still thieves and bandits running around. We are to listen for the voice we know, the voice of the Good Shepherd. We are to go out and come in through the gate, and he is the gate. Through him we go out into green pastures and are led beside still waters.

This premise runs consistently and constantly throughout the Gospel of John. Jesus says in verse 10, "I came so that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Abundant life is ours in and through a living, vibrant, healing journey with Christ. And I believe, in no other way. There is nothing else the world offers which can substitute for that relationship. There is no other spirituality or religion which can offer that abundant life. It is available only through Christ Jesus.

But in order to have that life, we have to listen to his voice. We have to come in and go out through him. We have to abide with him. We have to abide as the branches of a vine are connected to the vine and receive their life through the vine, and only through the vine.

When we leave this place today, we will go out into a world that immediately distracts. What plans do you have for this afternoon? And how about the rest of the week? Do you have a time set aside each day to spend with the Gate and the Good Shepherd? Do you have some time reserved to listen for his voice?

Do you long for the abundant life he promises, the life that is available only in and through him? Do you long for green pastures and still waters?

Listen for his voice.