

Sermon 4-26-26
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Based on the Gospel Lesson for The 4th Sunday of Easter, John 10:1–10.
Also on Acts 2:42–47; 1 Peter 2:19–25.

The Shepherd Still Speaks

A friend of mine raises sheep, and I've had the opportunity to watch how shepherding works up close. His pasture shares open fields with a neighboring farm, so his flock grazes side by side with cattle, goats, horses, and the neighbor's sheep.

One afternoon, I was sitting just beyond the fence and watched a small lamb wander away from the flock into the goats' corner. Almost immediately, the goats began bleating loudly, and before the lamb could turn back, one of the goats headbutted it hard. The poor lamb fell, cried out, and scrambled back to the safety of the other sheep.

Even after the lamb fled, the goats kept making noise, and I grew concerned. I tried yelling at them, but that didn't work, so I called for my friend. When he arrived, I explained what was happening, and he said, "Sheep do stupid things when left to themselves." Then, he looked at the sheep, whistled, and called out: "Come!"

Right away, the sheep lifted their heads. One by one, they left the mixed herd and walked straight toward him. The other animals kept grazing, completely unbothered, and within minutes, every one of his sheep was gathered safely.

The image of this story has stuck with me. I've often thought: why didn't the animals care that I was shouting? When my friend called them, somehow the sheep — specifically *his* sheep — recognized his voice, ignored all the other sounds in that field, and followed him to be gathered safely.

This is exactly the image Jesus gives us in today's Gospel. He says, "The sheep hear his voice... and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice" (John 10:3-4). Jesus does not call His people lions; He calls them sheep. Sheep are gentle creatures, but also weak and vulnerable. Left to themselves, they wander, drift into places they shouldn't be, and often don't realize the danger they put themselves in until it's too late. One wrong turn and they're in a wolf's den, or at the mercy of a goat. As my friend said, "Sheep do stupid things when left to themselves."

This is the comfort of John 10: not that sheep are strong, but that the Shepherd speaks. And when the Good Shepherd speaks, His sheep hear His voice and follow Him to safety.

That is what I saw in that pasture. My voice may have startled the sheep, but it had no hope of gathering them. They all looked at me and went back to grazing. But when the shepherd called, his sheep came. In the middle of that mixed field, surrounded by other animals, distracted by quite the goat racket, exposed to other dangers, his sheep still knew the difference between every other sound and the voice of the one to whom they belonged.

That is exactly where Jesus puts the emphasis. He does not begin with the sheep, but with the shepherd: "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3). First, the shepherd calls. He already knows which sheep are his. Only then do the sheep follow.

What does this mean for us spiritually? It means that it is not first about how strong our faith is, or about our ability to navigate the dangerous field that is this world. It is first about Christ. Christ, who knows His own. Christ, who calls His own. Christ, the Good Shepherd, who does not lose track of His flock in a crowded field.

And the field is certainly very crowded, and this is part of Jesus' point too. There are other voices in John 10. There are thieves and robbers (John 10:1, 8). There is the voice of the stranger (John 10:5). There are voices that do not gather the sheep but scatter them. Some voices only pretend to protect and feed the flock, but instead devour it. Later in this same passage, Jesus says, "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy" (John 10:10).

So, this isn't just some sentimental little picture of sheep in a pretty field, but a true picture of life in a dangerous world. Some voices accuse, telling you that you are unforgivable. Voices that terrify, telling you that you are alone. Voices that distort and deceive, pulling you away from the Shepherd. We hear all of these voices, which are, ultimately, the voice of the devil, who lies, accuses, and always seeks to scatter the flock.

Yet, over and against all these voices stands the voice of Jesus. His voice does not flatter the sheep, nor does it deceive. His voice, unlike all those other voices, tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but. He knows that sheep wander and are vulnerable. He knows that sheep cannot survive by pretending to be shepherds. But because He knows His sheep, His voice is not the voice of a stranger, or a thief, or a predator circling the field. It is the voice of the Good Shepherd, who "gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

That is why His sheep follow Him. Not because they can save themselves. Not because they never stray. But because the Good Shepherd's voice is known: the voice that gives life, the voice that forgives, the voice that leads the sheep out of danger and brings them home.

Thanks be to God, for this is exactly what Christ does for His Church: even in the midst of confusion and danger, He calls His own, and they are gathered where they belong.

Jesus says, "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9). In first-century Judea, the shepherd himself would lie across the narrow door of the sheepfold at night, becoming the living "door" who guarded the flock from predators and thieves. So also for the Church: Christ Himself *is* that door — the sole and saving entrance into the true sheepfold, and the vigilant barrier standing between His sheep and the wolves. In Him alone, amid a world rife with danger, the sheep are neither abandoned nor left to themselves, but kept in safety under His watchful care.

That means, for us, the Christian life begins not with our hold on Him, but with His divine service toward us: His voice, His call, His knowledge. "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3).

That begs the obvious question: where do Christ's sheep hear His voice now? Christ isn't visibly standing in a pasture, yet He still speaks. If the Shepherd still speaks, then where, in this world, do His sheep hear Him and come?

The answer is the Church. After Peter's preaching at Pentecost — after Christ crucified and risen has been proclaimed, and sinners have been called to repentance and Baptism — Luke describes the life of the Church in these words: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

This verse is one of the clearest pictures in all of Scripture of what the Church actually is. We often call this building the church, and that's understandable. But Acts shows us something deeper: the Church is the flock of Christ, gathered by the Shepherd's voice.

What is the Shepherd's voice? "The apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). The voice of Christ is heard wherever, whenever, His apostolic Word is faithfully preached and taught. The risen Shepherd gathers His sheep now through the Word that He entrusted to His apostles. So, when the apostles were preaching Christ, the Shepherd was speaking. Today, when the Scriptures are read, the Shepherd is speaking. When the Gospel is proclaimed, the Shepherd is calling His own by name.

This is why Christian preaching is so important. The Church does not live by the latest trend, but by the Holy Scriptures. The flock is not sustained by hearing new things, but by hearing the true thing repeatedly: Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins. And we need it, over and over again, because like sheep, when left alone, we go astray. Thankfully, Christ still speaks through His Word, and when He does, dead sinners live, wandering sheep return, burdened consciences find peace, and the flock is gathered where it belongs.

Along with the Word, the Church continues in "the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42). Christ does not tell His sheep that He loves them and then leave them hungry. He gathers them to His Table and feeds them. This is no ordinary meal, but His very Body and Blood, given for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Here, His voice becomes nourishment. His promise becomes communion. And His sheep rest secure — fed and sustained by the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for them and now lives to keep them.

So too, Luke says, the Church continues in fellowship (Acts 2:42). The fellowship of the Church is a life — a life that is shared because Christ has spoken. Those who hear the same Shepherd's voice and are fed at the same Table are drawn together into one: one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one Gospel. The sheep are no longer scattered, but are gathered into one flock — one household — the house of the Shepherd.

Lastly, Luke tells us the Church continued in "the prayers" (Acts 2:42). In these prayers, the life of the Church is bound together — apostolic doctrine confessed, fellowship expressed, and His gifts of Word and Sacrament received with thanksgiving. The Church is, as the Confessions teach, "the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught, and the Sacraments are correctly administered" (AC VII.1).

So then, what happens when the Shepherd is present? Where the Good Shepherd is present, there is reverence, for heaven's gifts are being given and "[awe] came upon every soul" (Acts 2:43). In His Church — both in the book of Acts and here in this sanctuary — the Lord Himself is present by His Spirit, acting and speaking through His appointed means, and this cannot be treated lightly. Once He confirmed the apostles' preaching with many wonders and signs; now He continues His work through Word and Sacrament, the very means by which He gathers and keeps His flock. And so, as Luke says, "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

Who adds? The Lord does. Why? Because the flock belongs to Him. The sheep are His. The voice is His. The Church is His. Salvation is His work from beginning to end. Just as my friend's sheep came when he called, because they were his and knew his voice, so Christ still calls, and still gathers, and still adds to His Church those who are being saved.

This should bring us great peace. If the Christian life depended on us finding our own way, we would be lost. If it depended on our wisdom, we would be deceived. If it depended on our strength, we would fail and fall. If it depended on us to remain in the flock, we would not remain at all. For sheep left to themselves do not simply wander — they perish.

So the good news is this: Christ does not leave us to ourselves. He gathers us where His voice is heard: into His Church, around His Word, at His Table, and into the prayers of His people. There He keeps us, preserves us, and sustains us unto life everlasting.

This leaves us with one final question: Why does the Shepherd's voice save us? Why does His voice do more than comfort us for a moment? Why does His voice actually bring wandering sheep home?

Peter tells us, saying of Christ: "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). Then, a verse later: "For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:25).

This is the deepest reason Christ's voice matters. His is the voice of the One who entered the field for us. He came into danger, amid the wolves and the goats, for us. He did not merely watch His sheep go astray, but went after them, taking our sin, our guilt, our foolishness, our wandering, and bearing it in His own body on the tree (1 Pet. 2:24).

That means when Jesus speaks, He does not speak as one who knows His sheep only from a distance. He speaks as the Shepherd who has already laid down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). He knows what it costs to bring us home. He is both the Good Shepherd and the Sacrificial Lamb. That makes His voice not only a true voice, but a *redeeming* voice. The Good Shepherd's wounds bear witness to His saving work: bearing sin and defeating death, so that the straying sheep can return at all. As Peter tells us, echoing Isaiah: "By [His] stripes, you were healed" (1 Pet. 2:24).

In this, the marvelous work of Christ comes together. In John 10, the Shepherd calls His sheep, and they know His voice. In Acts 2, we see where the voice is heard now: in the apostles' doctrine, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. In 1 Peter 2, we learn *why* that voice can save sinners like us — His boundless self-sacrificing love. And for Christ's sake, on the basis of that love and that sacrifice, God declares you righteous, and your sins are not counted against you.

So now, let us go back to that pasture for a moment. The field was crowded. The lamb wandered. The danger was real. My shouting did not help. The goats were still goats. And the sheep would not gather for me. But when the shepherd called, his sheep came.

Now, you can see the whole picture. That crowded field is this world. Those competing sounds are the many voices that would otherwise claim you. That wandering lamb is every sinner who thinks he can survive a few steps away from the flock. My shouting is every merely human attempt to fix what only the Shepherd can gather. And that call — that one call that cuts through all the noise — that is Christ.

The place where the sheep were gathered, safe at last — that is His Church now. And more than that, it is the promise of where this is all going. Because the Shepherd who speaks now will not stop until every one of His sheep is home.

Right now, He gathers us into His flock through His Word and Sacrament, and keeps us in the faith through the apostles' doctrine, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers (Acts 2:42).

But this is not the end. There is a greater gathering still to come. The day is coming when there will be no more crowded fields, no more wandering, no more strange voices, no more thieves, wolves, and no more danger circling the flock. The day is coming when the Shepherd who has called us by grace will gather us perfectly and forever into His house.

And on that day, the Shepherd's voice will no longer call across valleys of sorrow, for every tear will have been wiped away by His pierced yet risen hands. The Lamb who was slain will stand as the Shepherd enthroned, and His flock shall see Him face to face.

Then the Shepherd will speak no longer to call, but to bless: "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men" (Rev. 21:3). The flock is home. And you, beloved of the Shepherd, are home as well. He knows your name and has brought you safely through every shadow and silence. And now, forever, you belong to Him.

So hear Him even now. Above every other noise in the field, the Shepherd still speaks. And when He calls His own, they come home.

The Lord is our Shepherd. In this, we rest. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NKJV.