

April 25, 2010 4th Sunday of Easter
Ps. 23; John 10:22-30

You Hear His Voice

Children: (Nancy C. Townley, an Abidingdon author, is an ordained elder, Troy Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. She is a consultant in visual arts, drama, and liturgy) There was a young girl in my church who raised sheep. She was part of 4-H and one of the projects was to raise sheep. Daily she made sure that she counted her tiny flock; she fed them grain in the winter months when snow covered their meager pasture. She made sure that they had fresh water. Even on days when the winter winds howled and the snow swirled around, she would walk to the barns, and take care of her sheep. She had names for each one, fitting the personality of each sheep. She talked to them, hugged them, brushed them, and tended them. When the lambs were born, she would tearfully rejoice over each new birth, cuddling the tiny lamb and making sure that it received care from its mother. Even the lambs that were rejected by their mothers, received tender care from her as she made sure they were fed and nursed. And her sheep knew her voice. They could tell, from far off, when they heard her calling that it was her. One day I asked her about her sheep. She said that she loved them, and told me their names. **I called one of them by name, but it didn't come to me. I tried again, using a different tone of voice, to coax it to come, but to no avail. Then she whispered it's name, and it came to her,** trusting in her goodness. There will never be a time when she does not care about her sheep, she told me. Each one of them is precious. She said that it seems to her God cares for her just the same way. God knows her name and calls her. She places her trust in God's love and even when things get tough, she relies on God.

God made everything for a purpose. In the balance of creation, everything has its unique and fulfilling place. It is only when everything in creation does exactly what it is created to do that life flourishes. That is the image so beautifully described in the Psalm this morning. Green pastures, still waters, right paths, cup overflowing...an idyllic picture of creation in complete balance, life fulfilled, everything in its proper place, life as it was always created to be. This is life that the Psalmist describes as dwelling in the house of the LORD forever.

But whenever any creature fails to fulfill its created intention, its "calling" if you will, creation is out of balance, the world is in disarray, and life, as Thomas Hobbes (18th century political philosopher) described it, is "nasty, brutish, and short."

Now, how can this ever happen? Everything is created for a specific purpose and is predisposed to life. Plants follow their natural life cycle, animals follow their instinct. In a sense, life cycle is the "calling" of a plant. Instinct is the only "calling" to which an animal will ever respond, the only voice an animal ever truly hears. To use the example of sheep and shepherd in the texts this morning, it is said that sheep are pretty dumb. They blindly follow the lead sheep that responds to the shepherd's guidance to pasture, water, and safety. Sheep don't have a choice. "Herd instinct" is so strong among sheep that they will do

anything the lead sheep does. If it falls over a cliff what do the rest of the sheep do? If feed is laid out and the lead sheep does not eat the rest of the flock will die of starvation. Sheep blindly follow instinct and it is key to their survival, as long as they have a good leader!

Now, if it is true that everything has its purpose and place to which it has been predisposed to make for life, how can anything in creation ever get out of balance? The problem is us. We are the only species that can ever deny our true identity. Human beings are the only ones in all creation that can choose to live in such a way as to be detrimental to its own nature. We are the only ones in creation who can refuse to answer the call to life that is imbedded within us from the beginning. We are the only ones who, having clearly heard the voice of life calling to us, can ignore that voice, go our own way, and end up ruining our lives and messing up creation.

But along we always know the voice of life. We may not be bound by a predetermined life cycle like plants, we may not be slaves to instinct like other animals, but we, whether we admit it or not, always recognize the voice of life when it calls to us. We might pretend that we know and even love other voices that may call to us from time to time that lead us astray, but deep down inside the voice of life is the only one we truly recognize, the only voice we truly trust.

Have you ever called out to your children or grandchildren, called them by name, you know that they must hear you (they're not that far away!), yet they act as if they don't? When they finally come and you ask, "Why didn't you come when I called you the first time?", what is their answer?: "I didn't hear you!" Now it's one thing if they just want to keep playing and not come to dinner, but quite another when they are chasing after a ball that is rolling into the street.

Now don't hold them too accountable because you and I can remember when we used to do exactly the same thing! We humans beings are all the same. We can always clearly hear that unmistakable, very familiar, trusted voice calling to us, yet we resist, we have better things to do, we

know better what is good for us, or at least what is the most immediately gratifying at the moment. We are the only creatures who can ever choose to refuse to respond to that voice but, just like everything else in creation, we always know that voice when it calls.

You and I respond to so many voices, even though we know better. We are generous, trusting people who know how to share and find real joy in giving, yet we respond to the voice of mistrust and greed. We are made for community and mutual benefit yet we only sometimes seem to hear the voice of power, influence, and control. We are people of peace yet we respond to the call to war.

When Cheryl and I were in seminary we had our first pet. The small home we shared with two other classmates was outside of the city on the edge of the rural area of the county, so we thought there was adequate room there for a dog to roam. We selected a biblical name for this mix of mongrel that we adopted from the SPCA. We called him Ishmael, and the day he brought home a live chicken and proudly presented it to us on the front porch that was the day we realized that he truly lived up to the biblical description of his name, Ishmael: “and he shall be a wild ass among men.” One day Ish was sitting on the front porch barking feverishly at some mysterious phantom intruder. We were studying and ready for any excuse to take a break so we decided to sneak around the back of the house and peer around the corner at him. When he noticed us peeking around the corner of the house he immediately started barking feverishly at us! Then I called out, “Ishmael!” and immediately his barking stopped, htn e his tail began to wag feverishly, and we greeted one another in the front yard. I am sure he still could not quite make out who I was by sight from around the corner.....but he knew the sound of my voice.

That young girl in the 4H club knows something about this truth. It is her voice and her voice alone to which her sheep respond. Unlike her pastor’s very clear and distinct calling to a sheep, all that young shepherd has to do is whisper its name and it comes. It comes because it knows her voice. It comes because it has come to trust her voice and her voice alone as the source of life.

You and I answer so many other voices in life, and it is not easy to resist those voices. In the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John Jesus talks about the power of those other voices that call to us. Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” Like a good shepherd who always leads his sheep to green pastures, still waters, and right paths, Jesus, the Lord, is our shepherd. We hear his voice. He knows us and we follow. That is the only way we will ever be complete human beings, the only way our lives will ever be truly fulfilled. And what does Jesus say about those other voices? Jesus says of his sheep, “No one can snatch them out of my hand.” All these other voices may get pretty loud, they may be very enticing, but they do not have ultimate power over you because they are calling you to something that is just not you.

I was watching the Winter Olympics earlier this year and learned of the story, as many of you did I’m sure, of very special sled dog, a Siberian husky malamute named Isobel. Five years ago she was a full member of her pack’s sled team until she suddenly became blind. Unable to run with the pack anymore she was brought to the house to be cared for. But she missed her companions, became depressed, and stopped eating and drinking. So when she was brought back to the dog yard she immediately demanded to be hooked up. Her owner was obviously reluctant and wary to do it, but once she found her accustomed place next to her comrades all it took was the calling of a trusted familiar voice, “Mush!”

Brothers and sisters, unlike plants we are not bound by predetermined life cycle of automatic reaction. Unlike other animals, we are not slave to instinct. Unlike sheep we are not “dumb.” We are not bound to blindly follow the call of a shepherd with no other choice. We can choose, and we do. In a real sense, we are not limited by either life cycle or instinct in the path we choose to follow in our lives. No, we are not dumb sheep, but don’t you wonder sometime whether we are ever really smart enough to follow that familiar, trusted voice of life?

William G. Davidson