

Easter 4A 2017, May 7, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Recently I heard a story of a farmer participating in a research project at Penn State University's School of Agriculture. He had been invited by a professor to conference to make a presentation on some farming techniques he had adopted on his own farm. They were traveling by train with a change of trains in New York City. Since they had a couple of hours they decided to see the sights in mid-town Manhattan. While they were walking around Times Square, with all the hustle and bustle of people walking, horns honking, traffic moving through the streets, the farmer said, "I hear a cricket." How can you hear a cricket? With all this noise? No, I hear a cricket. And with that he walked over to a large planter on the sidewalk, with a small bush planted in it, stooped over and brushed away the dirt, and sure enough, there was a cricket. How could you hear that cricket, with all the noise going through here, the professor asked him. "It all depends what you're listening for," he said. It all depends what you're listening for.

Today Jesus says, "The gatekeeper opens the gate, and the sheep hear his voice...and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." So the question is, what are you listening for? Are you listening for the voice of the gatekeeper? Are you listening for the voice of Jesus? Are you like the farmer who can pick out the voice of the cricket in busy Times Square? Or are you more like the professor who can only hear the noise of the traffic, the din of a busy city?

For many years this fourth Sunday is Easter is often referred to as "Good Shepherd" Sunday. The gospel reading is always a portion of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John in which Jesus uses this image of sheep and shepherds. The psalm is the beloved 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, often read or sung at funerals. The Good Shepherd is a comforting image. It's also an ancient image. The oldest picture or painting of Jesus depicts him as a shepherd. Dating from the third century, it's an image found in the catacombs in Rome, before Christian art could be made explicit. Jesus is shown as a young man carrying a sheep around his shoulders.

But that's not the image Jesus uses in the portion we heard this morning. He doesn't call himself the shepherd. Rather, he calls himself the gate. He says, "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice....Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." On the one hand it too is a comforting image. The only way in and out of the pen is through the gate. Thieves and bandits crawl over the wall. But Jesus opens and closes the gate keeping the sheep safe. On the other hand, it's also a bit strange and somewhat mysterious, this image of a gate. But here's where the study of shepherding techniques in ancient Palestine opens up for us some insight. Shepherds would lead their sheep to grazing ground and they would build a temporary pen that might last several weeks while the sheep fed in that area. The pen would be made of brush and brambles piled about four feet high. An opening just large enough for the sheep to go in and out would be provided for. At the end of the day the shepherd would call the sheep to the pen, often giving each of them a name. When they are all gathered safely in, the shepherd would then lay down to sleep across the opening, keeping them safe from predators. So the shepherd literally becomes the gate keeping the sheep safe.

Still, the image of sheep and shepherds begs a larger question. Do we really like being compared to sheep? It isn't that sheep are stupid, contrary to what you might have heard in the past. They aren't as smart as say pigs or horses, which are very smart indeed. Sheep are on par with cows. But they aren't totally stupid. They can be taught to hear a voice and follow. They are very good followers. In fact, if you can get one sheep to go in a particular direction, the rest will follow. They are excellent at being herded together which makes them both safe but also

vulnerable. They aren't very good on their own. They need someone or something to guide them; a good shepherd and maybe several good border collie dogs.

So the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd or the Good Gate, as we might say today, is comforting, but also more than a bit sentimental. Most of us don't live on a farm and we have very little experience with sheep outside of a petting zoo that we've visited with kids or grandkids. Besides, modern Americans don't like to think of themselves as sheep who need the protection of pens and gates and shepherds. We prefer to think of ourselves as traveling our own paths, making our own choices, listening to our own voices. We aren't sheep. We are the shepherd. Shepherds of our own lives. Listening to that inner voice that tells us to be true to ourselves. Kings and Queens of our own castles. The rugged individualist. The great American story.

I'm not putting this down. It's a very powerful and potent image. The image of individuals in charge of their own destiny drives much of the dynamic innovation, self-reliance, responsibility and even autonomy that a free society depends upon. We encourage our young people to choose their careers wisely. We want them to be successful and independent and feel fulfilled and that they are making a contribution to society. When other voices speak louder and distract them from this vision, that's not a good thing. Voices that encourage pleasure over sacrifice, fast or easy wealth over hard work; these may be the thieves and bandits Jesus speaks about that come to steal and kill and destroy.

I want to lift up for us this morning a voice that we don't often hear, especially in our modern American life. This voice comes from our first reading this morning. It's a report of the experience of the Christian community in Jerusalem during the immediate years after Jesus' resurrection. Luke tells us in just a short sentence, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." In other words, these followers of Jesus practiced a radical re-distribution of their wealth, sharing their possessions with each other. They caught a different vision than the world usually sees. They heard a different voice than the world usually speaks. The voice they heard was the voice of the Shepherd who says, "do not worry about the future. The Father knows your needs and will take care of them."

At the very least I believe we need to acknowledge that Christians live in a very real tension between competing and sometimes conflicting voices. We hear the world say to us, "Listen to yourself. Be independent. Choose your own path. Be successful." At its best, these can be good voices, but they can also turn very bad. At the same time we also hear Jesus the shepherd say, "You are one of my sheep. I know your name. You belong to my flock. Sheep are not autonomous. We are to care for one another. No individual sheep is more important than another." How we navigate between these voices is often very difficult. Often its determined by where you see yourself mostly; as the rugged individual or as sheep in a communal fold of mutual care and protection led by the good shepherd. "What are you listening for?" Do we listen for the voice of the gatekeeper? Can we hear the sound of the cricket in the midst of busy Times Square?

Sermons shouldn't end with a question, but rather with a promise, a promise that brings life. You will hear the voice of the gatekeeper calling you by name. And he will lead you out and bring you safely home. You will run from the voice of strangers and will not listen to them. You will enter through the gatekeeper and will be saved, and you will have life and have it abundantly. Jesus, who is risen, says so. And that's the voice you hear today. Amen.