

Listen to the Words of the Shepherd

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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At the beginning of the reading from John today, the crowds gather around Jesus as he walks on Solomon's porch. "Stop talking in riddles and parables," they complain. "If you are Messiah, just tell us!" It's a challenge of authenticity, a call to defend his identity. Tell us *plainly*.

Haven't there been times when you prayed "that prayer"? Just tell me plainly what I need to know, Jesus. Show me clearly who you are, and the way I should go. Help me make the right decision. Make it crystal clear. Give me a sign. Keep it simple so I get it and there is no misunderstanding.

Yet, hasn't Jesus already told them, for crying out loud? Yes. Many times. But it wasn't news they could accept.

It's like the employees who complain that management hasn't given them enough information about a change that is in the works. There have been memos and meetings, Q&A sessions, and letters mailed to home addresses. And yet, the workers still grumble about a lack of communication. It's not that the message isn't getting out. The problem is that people don't like the message they are getting.

My husband, James, and I saw a somewhat humorous portrayal about the differences between how men and women communicate. One part of that presentation showed the husband asking his (obviously distressed) wife, "Honey, what's wrong?" The wife replied, "If you have to ask, then I am not going to tell you!" It was a way of saying in essence, "You know full well what's wrong, so your question is a dodge to make it look like you did nothing wrong! What's more, if you *really* don't know, then you're past help anyway and so I am not going to tell you!"

But it isn't that Jesus needs to improve **his** communications skills. He's been speaking clearly since the beginning. The problem is that the message he's preaching isn't what the people want to hear. They are looking for a particular *kind* of Messiah, someone who fits neatly in their idea of what a Messiah looks like, how a Messiah behaves. They are looking for someone to save them while they sit passively by and watch.

But Jesus is calling his followers into something completely different, something more. Jesus is calling his followers into a life-changing, intimate relationship. Jesus says, "*My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*"

Here's the real problem: those crowds demanding clear communication aren't listening to the shepherd's voice because *they aren't the shepherd's sheep*. So where does that leave *us*? If we claim to follow Jesus, shouldn't we be able to hear our shepherd's voice?

Every day, we are constantly bombarded with voices that are NOT the shepherd's voice. Every day the news is filled with tragedy, and it seems every news story tries to tap into our deepest fears. Every day, social media is filled with status updates that make us feel our lives aren't beautiful or perfect enough, happy enough, good enough.

Our phones are set to notify us of every opinion posted, every comment made, every change in the weather. There are voices everywhere, calling us to anger, hatred, greed (buy this! buy that!), and worry. How can we possibly hear the voice of Jesus calling to us in the midst of all that noise?

Sheep and shepherds were a big part of life in Biblical times. They were everywhere. I've probably read more about sheep and shepherds this week than you want to know, although I have found it interesting. Often, multiple shepherds would gather their sheep together for the night. In the morning they'd need to separate the flocks. Each shepherd needed to take their sheep their own way. **This** is what boggled my mind: a shepherd could just speak or whistle, and his sheep responded to him, left the combined flocks, and followed their own shepherd. The shepherd knew his sheep, and his sheep knew him and his voice.

Christ, as the Good Shepherd, knows his sheep thoroughly. The Jews who were listening to Jesus that day would have immediately known what he meant when he spoke of sheep and a shepherd. Many times, God of the Old Testament used the metaphor of a sheep and a shepherd in reference to God's people. So, Jesus didn't use this metaphor out of the blue. Anyone at this gathering would have had these Scriptures going through their minds. They might have thought of Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd. I have all I need." And at the end of this Psalm, "Surely, goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life..." Surely – it's guaranteed!



Jesus is a good shepherd! He knows us. He provides goodness, blessing, forgiveness, and mercy to us. He protects us. We can rest as he restores our souls. His voice is worth **listening** to. He is worth listening **for**. He is worth following.

The crowds wanted to know, "Are you the one? Are you the Messiah? Tell us plainly!" Jesus finally tells them, in no uncertain terms, exactly who he is. "The Father and I are one." This plain answer raises an even bigger question. Was he telling the truth, or was he the biggest blasphemer there ever was? Because claiming identity with God was a dangerous thing to do. It's what the pagan emperors did.

There are many voices that tell us how to grow closer to God: by having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a higher level of morality.

By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only – that we are known by the shepherd: "My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." (John 10:28)

So, it all comes down to a question of identity. The crowds want Jesus to prove he is who he says he is. They want some form of authentication. Instead of showing them his credentials, Jesus turns the question around. It isn't **Jesus'** identity that's in question here. It's ours. So, unless you are listening for his voice, you won't be able to follow him

The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, “Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep.” It says, “You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand.” The voice of the good shepherd is a voice of promise — a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God’s own.

The way we act tells the world who Jesus is. The things we do tell the world who Jesus is. What we say tells the world who Jesus is. And what we do and say also tells the world who **we** are, and whose voice we obey. Throughout the gospel, the message is always the same – Jesus calls, and those who listen to him, follow.

Jesus knows his identity is clearly demonstrated in what he does. When we listen to him and follow him, Jesus claims us as his own. He is doing the work of God. That’s his job. Our identity as his sheep is just as clearly demonstrated in what we do. Our job is to follow him.

And the only way we can follow him is to **listen for** the voice of the Good Shepherd and go where he calls us to go. Are **you** listening? Amen.



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ⁱ First photograph taken by Alison Warner-Smith.

ⁱⁱ Second image courtesy of <https://www.goodnewsfl.org/sheep-listen-voice>