

We Don't Always Want to Listen
John 10: 27, 28
April 29, 2007
First Federated Church
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A Shepherd was herding his flock in a remote pasture when suddenly a brand-new Lexus advanced out of a dust cloud. The driver, a young man in a finely tailored suit, crisp white shirt, neatly knotted tie with a dimple in the middle, and Oakley sunglasses. He stopped beside the shepherd and leaned out the window. "If I tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?" the man asked.

The shepherd looked at the man and then looked at his peacefully grazing flock. "Sure," he replied.

The young man pulls out his lap top computer, connects it to his telephone, calls up a GPS navigation system, scans the area, opens an Excel spreadsheet, tinkers with some complex formulas and finally says with a smile, "You have exactly 1,586 sheep."

"That's correct," the shepherd replied. "Take one of the sheep." The shepherd watched as the young man selected one of the animals and put it in his car.

"Before you go," the shepherd said, "if I can tell you exactly what business you are in, will you give me my sheep back?"

"Okay, why not" came the reply.

"Well, you're clearly a consultant."

Amazed the young man said incredulously, "Why, that's right. How did you ever guess that?"

"No guessing required," answered the shepherd. "You turned up here although nobody called you. You want to get paid for the answer to a question I already knew, and you don't know anything about my business. ***Now give me back my dog!***"

This morning we are going to talk about a shepherd and his sheep; actually, The Good Shepherd and His sheep. In our gospel lesson we read, *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

During the sermon series "The I Ams of Jesus" we looked at this passage often called "The Good Shepherd." We were reminded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, that *we* are His sheep and that we can *never* be ultimately *lost*. Today, though, we are going to look at this text from a little different angle. We are going to look at how, at times, we don't *want* to listen to the Good Shepherd.

Like most of you, I did not know a lot about sheep. We do not find a lot of sheep raised in central Illinois. In the Palestine of Jesus' day, though, sheep and shepherds were as common as cattle and feed lots are in our area. If you go to any of the rural areas around Peoria you will soon find large feedlots where cattle are "fattened up" before they make their way to our table for Sunday afternoon pot roast dinners.

In doing research for today's sermon I discovered a couple of interesting things about sheep. First, I learned that sheep are really quite gregarious. They are communal animals. They like to be in flocks. They readily communicate with each other and with their shepherd. Now, they may spread out like a drop of red dye in a glass of water but they try to stay in "touch" with one another through their "bleating." They seem to

instinctively know that there is safety in numbers; that they are less likely to be “picked off” by a predator when they are part of a group.

We, too, are communal beings. In Genesis we are reminded that God created us to be in community. “God created humans in the Divine Image; in the Image of God He created them; male and female” (Genesis 1: 26). In the second Creation story of Genesis we find that humanity finds its wholeness only when in community with other people (Genesis 2:18ff). Like sheep, we also know that safety lies in a group. If you are walking down a city street at night or into a parking lot you know that you feel much more at ease when someone else is walking with you.

Secondly, I learned that sheep really aren’t dumb animals. Several years ago a study at the Babraham Institute in Cambridge, England discovered that sheep are highly intelligent. They can recall a picture for as long as two years and they can distinguish the voice of the one who feeds them from all other voices. So why do sheep have this reputation of being “dumb?” One of the researchers believes that it is because sheep are easily frightened. This is especially true when they find themselves separated from the group. And when sheep are frightened, they do “dumb things,” not unlike you or I.

I was reminded of this fact in a book written by a retired pastor named Ben Patterson. In his book Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent Patterson writes of a time when he and three friends decided to climb to the summit of Mt. Lyell in Yosemite National Park. Two of the friends were experienced climbers. Ben and another fellow were not. Their base camp was only 2000 feet below the summit but the climb up and back would take the better part of a day because they would have to traverse a glacier.

As the four friends began their ascent the morning was crisp and the air was clean. After a little while the more experienced climbers began to get farther and farther ahead of Ben and the other climber. Now, as Patterson tells the story, he doesn’t know what got into him; it must have been his competitive nature, but he decided that he wanted to be the first to the summit! He thought that he found a short cut. It didn’t occur to him that the more experienced climbers hadn’t taken the short cut and despite the calls not to go that way, Ben set off on his own. A little while later he found himself trapped in a glacial cul de sac. Beside him was an outcropping of solid rock which would provide safety, but Ben was stuck. He couldn’t go back the way he came nor could he go forward. What’s more, it was nearing noon and the ice was beginning to melt. He looked down and he saw a 500 foot wall of sheer ice. Below that was the valley floor from fifty miles away!

I’ll let Ben tell you what happened next.

It took an hour for my experienced climbing friends to find me. Standing on the rock I wanted to reach, one of them leaned out and used an ice axe to chip two little footsteps in the glacier. Then he gave me the following instruction: “Ben, you must step out from where you are and put your foot where the first foothold is. When your foot touches it, without a moment’s hesitation swing your other foot across and land it on the next step. When you do that, reach out and I will take your hand and pull you to safety.” That sounded real good to me. It was the next thing he said that made me more frightened than ever. He continued, “But listen carefully: As you step across, do not lean into the mountain! If anything, lean out a bit. Otherwise, your feet may fly out from under you and you will start sliding down.”

I don't like precipices. When I am on the edge of a cliff, my instincts are to lie down and hug the mountain, to become one with it, not to lean away from it! But that was what my good friend was telling me to do as I stood trembling on that glacier. I looked at him real hard, I searched my memory for anything I might have done to him the past for him to harbor any ill will toward me. Was there any reason, any reason at all, that I should not tares him? I certainly hoped not! So for a moment, based solely on what I believed to be true about the good will and good sense of my friend, I decided to say not to what I felt, to stifle my impulse to cling to the security of the mountain, to lean out, step out, and traverse the ice to safety. It took less than two seconds to found out if my faith was well founded. It was. (InterVarsity Press, 1989)

In the story of his experience we have a parable of our own lives. We want to be independent. We want to be first. We want to go our own way, despite the protests of others and the Good Shepherd. We “hear” but we do not want to “listen.” So, we ignore the voices of wisdom and set off on our journey only to find ourselves in various cul de sacs of Life.

Following the Good Shepherd, listening for and to His voice at times goes against our own desires. “Turn the other cheek.” “Walk the second mile.” “Pray for those who persecute you.” “Love one another as I have loved you.” “Lay down your life.” “Pick up your cross.” When we ignore the voice of the Good Shepherd we discover that Life doesn't exactly work out as *we* wish. But, it isn't about *us*. It's about the Good Shepherd.

Our challenge as disciples is not only to “hear” but to “listen.” And to “listen” means to “follow” and to “follow” means to “do” and to “do” means that as our journey comes to an end we will once again “hear” the voice of the Good Shepherd, only this time it will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

To God be the glory. Amen.

When Jesus spoke to his disciples he did so by using the rich biblical metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep. For generations that was one of the metaphors used by the Old Testament prophets for God and Israel. It was a good metaphor because unlike today, sheep and shepherds were as common of a sight as cattle and feed lots are in our rural areas today.

I am not well acquainted with sheep but from what I understand sheep are by nature gregarious. They may slowly spread like a drop of red dye in a glass of water, but for the most part they travel in flocks. They also “talk” to one another through their high pitch bleats. This bleating keeps them in contact because they know that nothing is more dangerous than getting separated from the flock. When this happens they become easy prey for predators.

The inherent danger of wandering off from the group was brought home to me in a book by Ben Patterson. In the summer of 1988 he joined three friends in an attempt to climb Mt. Lyell, the highest peak in Yosemite National Park. Two of the friends were experienced climbers. Ben Patterson was not.

Their base camp was less than 2000 feet from the peak and the climb to the top and back to base camp would take the better part of a day due to the difficulty of crossing a glacier. On the day of the climb Ben and his friends were cracking jokes and chattering away. As the hours passed, though, and they made their way up the glacier, the two experienced climbers opened up a large gap between Ben Patterson and the other less experienced climber.

Patterson doesn't really know what got into him, perhaps it was his competitive spirit, but for whatever reason, he began to look for shortcuts so that he could beat everyone to the top. He thought he saw one, and ignoring the protests of his companion he made his way to an outcropping of rock.

The fact that the two experienced climbers had not chosen this “shortcut” didn't strike him as odd, though it should have. Thirty minutes later he found himself trapped in a cul-de-sac of rock atop the glacier. As he looked down he saw several hundred feet of a sheer slope of ice pitched at about a 45 degree angle. It is one thing to climb up a glacier; it is quite another thing to climb down or across it. He was only about ten feet away from the safety of a rock, but one misstep would send him sliding down a slide made of ice! He would not come to a stop until he hit the valley floor some fifty miles away! To make matters worse, it was nearly noon and the warm sun had the glacier glistening with slippery ice. He was stuck and scared.

To be continued. Really. Today.

Do you remember the consultant in my opening bit of humor? Well, unlike him, sheep are really not stupid animals. Dr. Keith Kindred of the Babraham Institute in Cambridge, England showed that sheep have outstanding memories. They can pick out a familiar face in a line of pictures—especially if the face is associated with a food reward. More amazing, some sheep can remember up to fifty images for as long as two years!

So how did they get the reputation of being stupid? Dr. Kendrick thinks that it is because they are easily frightened. This is especially true when they get separated from

the flock, when they can no longer hear the comforting bleating of the sheep or their shepherd's voice.

Our text assures us that we can never get truly separated from the Good Shepherd. *I give them eternal life*, Jesus says, *and no one will snatch them out of my hand.* No matter what happens in life, we are safe in the hands of the Good Shepherd.

Let's return to the story of Ben Patterson stuck on the glacier of Mt. Lyell. It took about an hour for two experienced climbers to reach him. Standing on the rock that meant "safety" to Patterson, one of the climbers leaned out and with his ice axe he chipped out two little footsteps in the glacier. Then he gave Ben the following instructions: *Ben, you must step out from where you are and put your foot where the first foothold is. When your foot touches it, without a moment's hesitation swing your other foot across and land it on the next step. When you do that, reach out and I will take your hand and pull you to safety.*"

As Patterson wrote: *That sounded real good to me. It was the next thing he said that made me more frightened than ever. He continued, 'But listen carefully: As you step across, do not lean into the mountain! If anything, lean out a bit. Other wise, your feet may fly out from under you and you will start sliding down.'*

Well, since he wrote the book, Ben Patterson obviously did what his experienced climbing buddy told him to do. Later, though, as he reflected upon the experience he said that it took all of two seconds for him to decide if his faith in his friend was well founded.

It may be scary but it is easy to listen to someone when your life depends upon it, but what if the Voice of the Good Shepherd tells us to do something that we'd rather not do.

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to do, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to walk one mile, walk with him two miles.

Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5:44)

How many times must I forgive; seven times?

No seventy times seven.

The hard part of faith is not making the "BIG" decisions, but those little day to day decisions. The hardest part of being in the Good Shepherd's flock is not in hearing the voice but in hearing it more as "white" noise, background noise. The hardest part is in listening; really listening.