

April 21, 2024 – 1 John 3:16-24 & John 10:11-18

There is a difference between hearing and listening. It is an undeniable truth, recognized by every parent who has ever spoken to a child. Every teacher who has ever spoken to a student. Every employer who has ever spoken to an employee. And every pastor who has ever preached to a congregation.

This morning, every one of you will hear everything that is said, read, and sung in this service. But the reality is, not every one of you will listen to everything that is said, read, and sung in this service. In fact, I'm sad to say that some of you will go home today and have absolutely no memory of what scripture was read, what hymns were sung, or even about the content of this very sermon.

There is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is easy. You just have to be in the same room. But listening is much more involved. Listening takes effort.

And it takes even more effort because we have so many voices speaking to us today. The world is just a much noisier place than it used to be. And I mean that quite literally. 100 years ago, you went through your day in silence, more or less. Today, you've got music on while you shop. The TV on while you eat. You're talking on the phone while you drive. There's always voices around you.

But then, our world has gotten a lot noisier figuratively too. We have a lot more people demanding our attention. Telling us what to think. What to do. Where to spend our money. Who we should vote for. What issues should concern us. What is right and wrong with our world today. It can be rather overwhelming to know what "voice" to listen to. Who do you listen to? How do you decide which voice gets your attention?

Well, there are a lot of criteria that we could use. But honestly, there's one criteria that usually matters the most to us: We listen to the people who care about us. They may not be the smartest. They may not be the most experienced. But we listen to them anyway, because we trust them. We trust that they have our best interests at heart. They care about us and so we listen to them.

You know, this isn't such a new problem, actually. There may be more voices shouting at us today, but people have always struggled to discern who they should listen to. The people in Jesus' day certainly had that struggle.

For generations, the Israelites had always known who they should listen to: Moses and the prophets. If you don't know what to do, you listen to Moses and the prophets. Moses, who faithfully led the people out of Egypt, across the wilderness, and into the promised land. The prophets, who preached with concern for the welfare of God's people, begging them to turn from sin and seek God's forgiveness. Moses cared about the Israelites. The prophets cared about the Israelites. The Israelites trusted Moses and the prophets because Moses and the prophets cared about them.

But by Jesus' day, the prophets had been silent for 400 years. And those who were called to teach and interpret the Scriptures had become less than faithful at the task. The Pharisees and the chief priests had become self-serving shepherds, protecting their status and positions of power. Nobody believed that the Pharisees and chief priests cared about God's people. They had power, they had influence, but nobody trusted them.

And then Jesus comes along. And his voice was different. It was the voice of someone who cared. Someone who really, truly cared about them. "*They will listen to my voice,*" Jesus says in our Gospel reading. Why was Jesus so convinced that they would listen to him? Why was he so convinced that they would trust him?

Because, as John says in our Epistle, what Jesus spoke were not just words. Jesus loved in deed and in truth. Certainly, he loved in deed and in truth when he laid down his life for us. But, even before that, Jesus' entire ministry was a ministry of love shown in deed and truth.

It was a ministry of healing the blind and the lame and the sick. Of casting out demons. Of raising the dead. It was a ministry of proclaiming forgiveness to tax collectors and prostitutes and Gentiles. Jesus cared about people. He cared about sinners. He cared about his sheep. And his sheep trusted him as a result. As I think most people would.

In this Gospel lesson, Jesus calls himself the “good shepherd.” Now, when you hear the word “good,” different things might come to mind. Because the word “good” is not a very precise word. It's one of those words that if you're in a high school English class and you describe something as “good,” your teacher will probably tell you to use a word that's more descriptive.

Here, the Greek word that's used for “good” is the word “kalos.” Kalos is an interesting word. Because it's very often used when comparing two things. Jesus isn't saying that he's just a “good” shepherd. He's not just saying that he's good at his job or that he's generally a good and decent guy.

No, a more precise way of translating this would be, “I am the best shepherd. I am the excellent shepherd. I am the noble shepherd.” But he doesn't say that to boast about himself like the Pharisees do. To put himself in a position of power or authority or undeserved respect.

No he says, “I am the good shepherd because I lay down my life for the sheep.” Jesus is the good shepherd. The best shepherd. The most excellent shepherd. Because he cares so much for his sheep that he will die for them. And that makes him a much better sort of shepherd than what you usually find.

The Pharisees? They won't die for their sheep. The chief priests? They won't die for their sheep. They treat their sheep like a hired hand treats his sheep. They treat their sheep like they belong to somebody else. The wolf comes and they are out of there. They care about themselves first and foremost, not the sheep. And so the sheep will never trust their voice. The sheep really shouldn't trust their voice. They are not trustworthy.

Jesus is the better shepherd because he lays down his life for his sheep. He could run, like those hired hands do. Nobody would blame him for running. They're sheep, after all. Who dies for a stupid sheep? Well, a sheep who cares does.

And so, Jesus is telling the truth when he says, “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” When Jesus was arrested, he wasn't trapped by the Pharisees and chief priests. He wasn't outsmarted, outmaneuvered, or overpowered. Jesus could have abandoned us to sin, death, and the devil, and no one could have stopped him. No one could have faulted him for doing so.

But Jesus chose to lay down his life for us. He chose to lay it down, and he chose to take it up again. Just as he was in full control of his death, he was also in full control of rising from the dead. He is the good shepherd who leads us not simply into the valley of the shadow of death, where we both end up imprisoned by death. No, he leads us through the valley of the shadow of death, to the other side. To the resurrection beyond death.

And so he's a shepherd who stands by us at our very worst moments and says with absolute confidence, “You don't need to be afraid. I will lead you through this. Even if you die, yet shall you live. For even though I died, yet do I still live and reign forevermore.”

The sheep hear the good shepherd's voice and they follow him because he gives them eternal life and no one will snatch them out of his hand. That is the voice of someone who cares. That is a voice of someone you can trust.

And that is the voice you hear today. You hear it in the words of scripture. And you also hear it from me, as an under-shepherd of the good shepherd. You hear it when I say that in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You hear it when I say to you that this is the Gospel, the good news, of the Lord.

Most of all, you hear it when I say that on the night that Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, broke it, and said, “Take and eat, this is My Body, which is given for you... Take and drink, this is My Blood, which is shed for you.”

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd gives His Body and His Blood for the sheep. For you. The Good Shepherd cares for you. And he shows that cares in His Holy Supper.

That you may know that you too are part of his flock. You have heard his voice. You have followed it to this building this morning. And now you are one flock following one shepherd. To eat at a table prepared by him before all the enemies of this world. Anointed by Holy Baptism to drink from a cup that overflows with his own blood. That goodness and mercy may follow you all the days of your life. And that, because he laid down his life and took it up again, you may dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.