

“We Hear His Voice”

John 10:22-30

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Stranger danger! We’ve all, prayerfully, taught this valuable life lesson to our children. Don’t talk to strangers. Don’t follow strangers. Don’t get in the windowless van that says free puppies on the outside. Some of you adults probably need a reminder of that one too. But there’s a reason we teach that to our children. We want to keep them safe, guarded, and protected so that they can grow up and become good adults. We are “shepherding” them into the formidable years of their lives. Jesus, in our text this morning, calls us His sheep, and tells those who are not of His sheepfold how He knows which ones are His. He says in verse 27, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” Because of being among His flock, we are protected, guarded, and safe in our faith, because our Good Shepherd is doing the work to teach us that He is our hope and salvation. He does this so that we will be able to say, “Stranger danger,” when those who seek to do us harm try to call us out of His care. As those who are in the faith, we hear His voice, and we cling to it for our protection.

Because we know the voice of our Good Shepherd, we also know what the opposite sounds like, the voices of the strangers who call after us who would lead us away from the safety of His care and protection. But those voices are not always easy to discern, and often appear to be good and even sound like they might be the voice of our Shepherd. These strangers that we have to battle are not always external threats either. The voice of our reason can be a devilish tool that works against us if we allow it power over and above what God Himself has told us by His Word. Reason, when used properly, is a gift, one which can rightly help us identify strange voices that masquerade as the voice of our Shepherd. But all too often in the church at large today, people have either put their reason to bed, or have elevated it above the very Word which binds us to Christ.

So many have come up with this idea that they have a secret ability to speak directly with God, bypassing what Scripture teaches us in Hebrews 1:1-2, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son...” We pray to God and He answers, but not in the way that these wayward Christians believe. To understand the answers to our prayers, we don’t get a special revelation from God. He already revealed the answers to us in His Holy Word, and His Word is Jesus Christ, His only Son. People try to reason their way into understanding God and what He does, instead of trusting that which He has spoken to us by His Son, as Scripture teaches us.

Rev. Josh A. Killion
Trinity Lutheran Church - Austin, Texas
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This perversion of the voice of reason is what leads people down the path of false doctrine. It leads those who claim to be Jesus' sheep to follow someone who is proclaiming something contrary to the Word of God. They have convinced themselves they are hearing the Shepherd's voice, but it is the devil masquerading in it to lead them astray and pull them away from our loving God. All of us are subject to this temptation. We must keep our reason in its proper place, as a tool to help us understand what God says to us. It does not determine what the truth is, because only Jesus Himself is the truth, and His Word is eternal and unchanging.

The voice of reason is one that, rightly used, is an extension of our Shepherd's voice. By it, we can properly understand that which He has revealed to us in Holy Scripture, and apply it appropriately to our daily lives. We aren't lemmings who blindly follow empty words in a book. We are sheep who have heard the call of our Shepherd. The Shepherd calls, and we respond. We follow Him. It is the natural progression of things for a sheep. When its shepherd calls, it knows his voice, and it follows him. And we know how to follow Him because He tells us how we are to follow Him. It is why we study the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Creeds in confirmation class. These are tools which the Lord has given us that we might know how to follow Him. We follow Him by faith, and by faith we trust in His Word of promise and receive His gracious love and comfort.

Our Shepherd's voice of comfort is what sustains us in that faith. It overcomes the voice of reason by the power of God which is His revealed Word. Paul says in Romans 1:16 that the Gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." The Gospel is the voice of comfort from our loving Shepherd. Because what could be more comforting than our salvation? In the gift of eternal life which He promises in our text this morning, we have all the comfort we could ever need in this life. There certainly will be times of heartache and pain, and in those times, it is hard for us to look past our feelings and emotions. It happens to all of us. We get caught up in the grief and suffering, and we forget the truth of Jesus' redemption that has saved us from eternal death. There can be nothing more comforting than that truth.

The truth that Jesus loved us, His sheep, so much that He gave Himself up into death for our sakes, is the only thing that can assuage our pain and suffering. No one can know a greater love than that. Jesus tells us this in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Comfort is available to us in the redemptive voice we hear in God's Word, and in the love He shows us in His blessed gift of forgiveness in the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Comfort was spoken to Sophia this morning as that water washed over her head in the name of the

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She heard the comforting voice of her Shepherd proclaiming that all of her sins are forgiven. They have been washed away by the blood of Jesus as He has taken them all upon Himself to bear them to the cross and redeem her of every one of them.

He speaks words of comfort in His Holy Gospel, and He also speaks words of hope to those who believe in Him. We are not “most to be pitied” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, because we have the hope of the resurrection which He has promised us, and shown us by way of His own resurrection. Jesus says in John 5:28-29, “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” Comforted by the truth of our salvation, we have the hope that we will hear the voice of our Shepherd call us out of the tomb, to be bodily raised to eternal life with Him.

And to keep us in that hope, Christ has appointed undershepherds to guard and protect His sheep until He returns. By proclaiming the Gospel and rightly administering the Sacraments according to Christ’s command and institution, pastors tend to the needs of our Lord’s sheep. Because we are people who are still bound to this sinful flesh that continually tries to lead us astray. Our Old Adam constantly seeks to corrupt us and take us back to a time when he had the reins and was in control of our desires. He seeks to use them to his advantage, and to the detriment of our everlasting souls. Our Lord and Savior in His great omniscience knows the needs of His sheep and the weaknesses of our sinful flesh. That is why He has given us trained men to lead His flock to repentance and the forgiveness He has won and freely gives to us in the means of grace.

The pastor brings forgiveness to God’s people in the stead and by the command of Christ Jesus. Not because he is special or has some special power, but because he is following the voice of his Shepherd which has called him into the service of His Holy Gospel. It is a great honor and privilege to stand in the stead of Christ for you, interceding on your behalf in the Divine Service, and proclaiming that which Christ has won for you. And as one of His sheep, I get to hear those same words which I speak for the benefit of my own forgiveness, because they are not my words, but Christ, our Good Shepherd’s. Continually keeping and strengthening you in the faith by way of God’s Word and Sacraments is a blessed gift for both of us.

We are not just individuals who gather together and receive from God for ourselves, but we are His flock. We are one body in Jesus Christ, because we have been baptized into His death and resurrection. We will share in a resurrection like His because we all

have been called to be His sheep. Coming together as a flock is so much more than a social arrangement, or an agreement to meet on a particular day to satisfy our need for comradery. It is where we receive the voice of hope which our Shepherd speaks to us—His words of hope that show us the truth of our salvation. The Apostle Peter teaches this to us well, as he opens his first letter in 1:3-5:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

We are being guarded by God's power, which He shows to us in His Word. By His only Son, we are made righteous and kept so according to His gift of forgiveness which comes to us in the means of grace, that we might receive the inheritance He has promised us, and the eternal reward in which we rest our hope in this life.

The voice of our Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is not a hidden thing we need to find, or something we hear in the back of our mind. The voice of God is revealed to us in Holy Scripture, and the message of hope and comfort that it brings is loud and clear to those who belong to Him. Sophia Jane has heard the voice of her Shepherd in the waters of Holy Baptism this morning, and we together with her, have heard the voice of our Shepherd as we remember our own baptisms, that great moment when He called us as His own. Our voice of reason cannot overcome that, or minimize it. We have heard His voice of comfort and hope which sustains us in our faith unto eternal life.

And we hear His voice, not in secret, but visibly and concretely in the simple means of water, bread, and wine, in His very body and blood which is present here for the forgiveness of all our sins as it is washed over us in Baptism and placed into our mouths in the Sacrament of the Altar. By His all-atoning sacrifice on the cross, and by His bodily resurrection, He has given us eternal life, and no one can snatch us out of His hand. He holds us safely in His loving arms, carrying us through this life until we meet Him face to face in eternity, where we will wait with joy for the resurrection of the last day, when we are reunited with our bodies to be His eternal companions in the blessedness of the new heaven and the new earth. Amen.