

The Good Shepherd's Voice

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This passage we heard from John 10 speaks of voice, knowing voice and recognizing it. This idea of voice is an important thing. Whose voice are we listening to? Whose voice are we trusting? It's an idea that can and should be understood on multiple levels.

One of the things I want to pull out of the reading is this. In this passage Jesus said, "The sheep know my voice." Further, Jesus tells us he is the gate to the sheep pen. He is the Good Shepherd. It's Jesus' voice we are to be listening for. It's this voice that calls us into our being.

Having said that, let's now go back to the beginning. I'm not talking about the beginning of John, though the opening words of John do say, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Later it continues on and speaks of Jesus being God in the flesh (John 1:1-14). But if we go back to the very beginning; to Genesis, when "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep..." (Genesis 1:2), how did creation come into being? How is it that we are here and we are present? How is there sun and earth and air and water and soil? How is it that every living thing that grows up from the ground, that crawls along the earth, that swims in the deep, that flies through the sky exists? How did it all come into being?

Well, Genesis says it pretty plainly. God spoke saying, "Let there be light," and it was so. When we hear this passage from John about the Good Shepherd, and how the sheep know Jesus' voice, and they come to him, there's a sense of awe we should be filled with. It is this very same voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd, that called creation into being; called everything into existence.

This is a powerful and frightening understanding. One of the things we're taught about God in scripture is God's voice can be painful, even deadly. We here stories like Moses at the mountain of God, Mount Sinai, with all the gathered Hebrew people after having been miraculously brought through the Red Sea. In this story, the people are excited because God is going to speak to them. They've gone through two or three days of purification rituals and bathing. They've marked off the mountain so no living thing can get too close, lest that person or creature die. They will finally hear the voice of their God. (Exodus 19:1-15)

Yet, when the day came, God descended upon the mountain in a dark cloud. God called Moses to God's self and told Moses to warn the people to stay back, not try and break through the barriers to see God for themselves, or they would perish. Then God spoke to them. With thunder and lightning and tremendous celestial trumpet blasts God gave the Hebrew people the ten commandments. The people were terrified. They told Moses to not let God speak to them. They were convinced if God spoke to them, they would most certainly die. (Exodus 19:16 – 20:21)

The 1995 TV mini-series, *The Bible Collection: Moses*, starring Ben Kingsley, portrays this scripture story a bit more dramatically. Moses is standing on the base of the mountain thoroughly enjoying the voice of God. It's wonderful to him. It takes him a moment before he notices the people behind him cowering. They want Moses to make it stop. The voice of God is too much for them. It's too painful, too frightening, too terrible. They cannot hear the beauty Moses hears.

We here stories like this and there's two ways we react. The first is we are in awe. God is so powerful that even God's voice is painful to hear. Maybe God's voice could even make our heads explode, like at the end of the 1999 movie, *Dogma*, in which Alanis Morissette played God. God is so powerful that all it took was God speaking over the course of six days and the world was literally called into existence. God is so powerful, that we should fear the voice of God.

That fear is the second reaction. God is so powerful we don't want to hear the voice. That voice is scary, and loud, and terrifying. Just look back at the passage I described from Exodus 19 and 20. A whole nation was terrified of the very same God that brought them out of slavery into freedom. They didn't experience walking and talking with God face to face in the Garden of Eden, before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. No, this is a real sense of fear and trepidation, where if God actually speaks to them, they're going to die.

But here, in this gospel lesson, it's that very same voice we hear speaking to us. It's that very same voice that, from the Hebrew Testament, we were on some level taught to fear. It's that very same voice that says, 'My sheep hear my voice and come to me. My sheep hear my voice and recognize the grace, the power, the love, the hope, and they come to me. I am the Good Shepherd, the gate by which my sheep come in and go out and find pasture. I am the way to a better life and more nourishing sustenance. I am the way and the truth and the life.' (We'll hear more on that scripture next week.)

That idea of this voice, so terrifying and terrible and awe inspiring, being the same voice Jesus speaks with, should give us pause. Jesus is love. God is love. That voice speaks to us and brings us into new life.

The thing is, while that voice calls us into new life, fills our hearts, and brings us forward, it also calls us into action. It calls us to be responsible in how we listen. It calls us to be responsible in what we listen to. It calls us to be responsible with what we pour into our bodies and how we let that influence us.

In my conversations with folks and in my random readings, I've come across the idea of what we consume and spend our time on is what fills us. Let me put it this way... If you are a very active person who goes out and runs and exercises and lifts weights and does yoga and pilates and CrossFit; if you do all of these things, you are filled with a knowledge and even a transformation of who you are. So, this information and these practices become habits. More than that, they become an integral part of your life and part of your identity.

Now, exercising and being fit and being healthy are all good things. They are actions that can lead to a prolonged life, they lead to a healthier heart, they lead to more self-confidence, they lead to a better everything... in the physical sense. It even helps your mind to work better and faster.

That's just one example of how what we involve ourselves in influences how we live our lives. This same thing happens with what we listen to, from what kind of music, to what kind of speech, to which preachers and politicians, to what audiobooks we have playing in the car.

There was a point where I was reading books about werewolves and supernatural creatures left and right. My perception of the world, while still very much grounded in reality, took on a

note of the primal, the possessive, and in times of threat to my family, the predatory. I enjoyed and even thirsted for more stories of being able to run in the night and have access to such a simple, even spiritual existence. Wolf-like behavior traits started to become part of my personality. While I knew I couldn't stay in that space, and while it was kinda fun to be in that more primal mind, I could not let it consume me.

That is the danger when we are not careful with what information we take in; when we are not careful or intentional about whose *voice* we listen to. If we listen to negative, unconstructive, or degrading speech, then that is what we are filling ourselves with. If we listen to propaganda, hate speech, blatant misinformation, then that is what we are filling our hearts with.

The point I'm getting at here, is that we have a responsibility for what we put into our bodies, our minds, and most importantly our hearts. Behavior, fueled by the information we consume, the media we interact with, and the voices we listen to, can become "hardwired" into our brains. It literally becomes programmed into our personalities, and can possibly even make it that much harder to change, learn, and grow.

Jesus, in this passage, is giving us a clue as to how we are to be responsible. We are responsible when we listen for that voice which speaks truth. When we listen for that voice which inspires awe, inspires love, inspires hope, we train ourselves to filter through all the other voices that distract us. When we listen for that voice, we have a checks and balance we can use.

- Does this voice that I hear speak of love?
- Does this voice that I hear speak of hope?
- Does putting this information into practice make me a better person?
- Does it make me a better Christian?
- Does it make me a better human being?
- Does this voice inspire me to do good?
- Does this voice teach me to do no harm?
- Does this voice help me to stay in love with God?

If the voice we hear does not teach or inspire these things in us, then we need to deeply examine who and what we are listening to. If the voice we hear speaks of hate, it is *not* the Good Shepherd's voice. If the voice we hear causes a malicious hurt, it is *not* the Good Shepherd's voice. If the voice we hear speaks of dividing community, destroying relationships, discriminating against neighbor and stranger for whatever reason, it is *not* the Good Shepherd's voice. If the voice we hear inspires us to see ourselves as superior or more righteous or more entitled than another human being, it is *not* the Good Shepherd's voice.

Listen for the voice that spreads love, that spreads hope. Listen for that voice that calls us into a better community, a better way of living, a better life.

I'm not saying that there won't be pain and struggle in listening to this voice. Pain and struggle are part of learning and growing. What I'm saying is the value of a voice that speaks to love, will always outweigh a voice that speaks to hate.

So, as we go forward... As we are in this time and this creation which was spoken into existence by God's voice; that same voice that *calls to us*, let us always remember who we are and whose we are. Let us always remember to listen for that voice calling us into community,

into hope, into transformation and re-creation. For God speaks to us day in and day out. We need to listen. We need to hear. We need to make love a very, very crucial part of our being.

In Jesus name, Amen.