

## Good Shepherd

A while back I encountered something on Facebook that I felt the need to respond to. It was one of those “suggested for you” articles and I got sucked in. I have since learned it is unhelpful to respond to those – even more so than to people I actually know.

Anyway, I wrote a carefully researched and worded response. I got called a sheeple. I ended up deciding I should have scrolled on by and deleted my comment.

But you probably heard that word during the pandemic – sheeple. A made-up word that is a mesh of sheep and people. It’s a derogatory term directed at those who believed that following the CDC recommendations and local health measures might help save lives...and who were pretty willing to do whatever was asked, even when it was painful.

Now, yes, I know unkind behavior wasn’t limited to a particular perspective or party. But the term sheeple was, and it’s a good image for this passage.

My response to the term sheeple – what I maybe would have said if I’d kept that particular social media argument going – is that we are all sheep. It’s all about which shepherd you’re listening to.

Honestly, people often seem to be more confused about which shepherd to listen to than sheep are. The very lives of sheep depend on knowing their shepherd’s voice. We have the luxury of believing that our lives don’t – that we can do just fine on our own. We sometimes end up listening to a shepherd who seems to hold all the same beliefs we do.

Today is Ash Wednesday...the beginning of Lent. Ash Wednesday is the day we are most keyed in to our shortcomings – our tendency to listen to the wrong shepherd.

And when we listen to the wrong shepherd, it’s often not a shepherd who has our best interests at heart. It’s more like we’re listening to the hired hand who doesn’t really care. Or worse, we let in the thief, or the bandit, or the wolf.

Ash Wednesday is also a day we are reminded of our mortality. Of and by ourselves, we are not immortal. We do not give ourselves life and we cannot make ourselves live forever.

Jesus is the gate – the door – to salvation – to abundant life. And as we’ve said before, abundant life is about the depth of relationship with Jesus in the here and now and eternal life in the resurrection.

This passage is really a continuation of Sunday's story about the healing of the man born blind. Modern Bibles have chapters and verses. The early manuscripts did not. They didn't even have punctuation. So, this should be viewed as a continuation of last Sunday's reading. The Pharisees are there...the disciples...likely even the newest disciple – the blind man – are there.

This good shepherd speech by Jesus is his interpretation of what happened with the blind man. Jesus was the gate through which the man passed to salvation. The voice of Jesus the shepherd led him there.

What did that salvation look like for the blind man?

Like everyone who passes through that gate, the first and foremost component of that salvation was an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus and an understanding of who he is.

But the man's salvation also took on features particular to his situation. His sight was restored. He was saved from the isolation...the marginalization. Although he was kicked out of his synagogue community, he was taken into a new community, one grounded in intimate relationship with Jesus.

What does salvation in the here and now look like for you? What prevents you from listening to the shepherd's voice?

That really is what Lent is about. We enter into disciplines and practices that help us identify the voice of the shepherd and learn how to follow it.

We also learn what things block us from hearing that voice. For example, maybe you decide you're going to fast from something. Whether you're successful or not – and by the way I most often am not, at least not completely – you will learn what role that particular thing plays in blocking your relationship with Jesus.

And where do we hear his voice? Scripture is one place. Each of our weekly devotions from the Van Gogh devotional begins with a passage from the Bible.

But there are other places we can hear his voice. Through the music of worship, through art and beauty and things created, both by God in nature and by humans through whom God creates.

We hear it in the voice of our community as we share insights and reflections on the week's devotion. We hear it in times of solitude and meditation on a passage or piece of art.

How do we recognize the good shepherd's voice from competing voices – voices of thieves and bandits? The good shepherd's voice will always lead us to two things...one is abundant life...deep life...life that is living water flowing through us.

If the voice you think is Jesus seems to be leading to a place that does not look like life, either for you OR someone else, it's probably not the shepherd's voice.

The second is love. Later on in John's gospel we'll hear Jesus say to his disciples, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. You will be known by your love.

That saying is for us too. Others will know we are listening to the voice of the good shepherd if it leads to us loving others...even ones we don't think are worthy of love. Jesus never said – Love one another...but don't love Judas. He didn't say that. And Jesus seems to be saying that sometimes it's the kind of love that will ask us to lay down, if not our very lives, at least something of our own ego or self-centeredness for the sake of others.

Life and love...that's where the shepherd's voice will lead us. Life with Jesus now and eternal life in the resurrection. And a life of love and service to one another.

Soon, we will be reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We will face the reality of our mortality and our sinfulness.

We will remember that salvation comes when we listen to the voice of the shepherd...when we walk through the gate that both is Jesus and held open by Jesus.

We will remember that there are voices of thieves and bandits who wish to snatch our life and our relationship with Jesus from us.

We'll remember that there will be times we'll probably listen to those other voices...we'll walk through those other gates. But as the shepherd, Jesus will keep calling us back.

As we begin this journey, we will listen for the voice of the shepherd in our Lent practices.

And we will remember that although we will one day return to dust, God created us out of dust once, and will do so again.