

Sunday, April 26, 2026 - Meditation

Welcome to the sheepfold. Every Sunday this is where we gather. It's a protected space. It's a place where the chaos of the world is left behind for a little while. It's a sanctuary. We come here to listen to the voice of Jesus, to be in his presence. We enjoy an intimacy with him here. He's close. We are reassured in our faith. What can be more reassuring than Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd. Because he's our shepherd surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

That theme, the image of the Lord as a shepherd, is taken up again by Jesus in the gospel of John. Here the image is enlarged from shepherd to gatekeeper: "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him..." Jesus is telling us there is really only one entrance to the fold which is through him. He is also saying that all who enter will find refuge: "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

The shepherd/gatekeeper brings us into the sheepfold but also leads us out: “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him.”

How do we continue to follow him outside this place? What happens when we’re no longer in the protected space of this sanctuary? The answer is this: “his sheep know his voice.” “The sheep follow him, because they know his voice.”

I was under the impression that sheep are not very smart animals, and to compare God’s people to sheep was something less than a compliment. That maybe not too far from the truth. However, I was curious about the sheep’s ability to recognize the voice of a shepherd, the human in charge of looking after them. And I found out that, indeed, they can do that. “Sheep can indeed recognize and remember their shepherd’s voice, and they can distinguish it from unfamiliar voices. Modern observations and studies note that sheep can discriminate between voices and even remember familiar humans and

other sheep over long periods. In practical shepherding, sheep respond to a specific call, whistle, or vocal pattern because they associate it with safety, direction, and food. So the biblical image is not random; it draws on a real animal behavior that would have been familiar to the people of Jesus's time."

The gospel says "When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." I'd like us to imagine, when we leave here today, we are not leaving our shepherd behind in this place. Rather, he is leading us out the gate, or door, in our case. "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

And we follow him because we know his voice... How do we discern his voice from all the other voices vying for our attention? How do we distinguish the voice of Jesus from the thieves and bandits, the voices that could do us harm? That could lead us away from him? It's a noisy world we live in. Just pull out that electronic device that fits so neatly in your pocket or purse. It's screaming at us all the

time. Yesterday I was at Stewarts filling my gas tank, and all the while the speaker overhead was blaring music and advertisements at me. (I stopped short of a full tank just to get away from it. From now on I will only go there for ice cream.)

It's on the TV. It's the news. The political movements, cultural trends, and ideologies competing to shape our worldview and loyalties. Most of them have little substance beyond a polished or pushy come-on.

I'm currently reading a biography of Mark Twain, so I have an excuse to quote him here: "In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing."

We can be taken in by the voice of strangers if we aren't familiar with the voice of our shepherd. When we're out in the field, how do we distinguish his voice from the rest?

One way is to listen to him when we can, like now. To hear his voice in scripture. If we're going to recognize his voice, we need to spend some time listening to what he has said. In the book of Acts we read, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The key word there is "devoted" which means more than occasionally, probably more than once a week.

Second is to remember we have the shepherd guiding us from within. If it's true the Holy Spirit lives in each believer, then we have in us one whose voice IS the voice of the shepherd. The power of discernment, of wisdom, of understanding, of judgment is present with us through the Holy Spirit.

In a little while our gatekeeper/shepherd will be opening the gate for us to go out. Will we know his voice? Will we listen? Will we follow? "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."