

FOURTH
SUNDAY OF
EASTER

The Rev.
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John 10: 22-30 4 Easter C 2013
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me."

Who is Jesus? What does he want and what are we to do in response? These are in essence the questions that we hear from those encountering Jesus as he is walking around in the precincts of the Temple.

After 2000 years or more of people generation after generation asking the same question the answer still appears open for debate. In the various forms of religion and Christianity represented in just our close geographical area the answer ranges from Jesus being a great prophet, but not Messiah, a savior whose primary act was to die for our sins, Jesus who is a figment of our collective delusion and even Jesus as a personal life coach teaching us how to live successful and prosperous lives.

Spread out a bit beyond our immediate neighborhood and you will discover Jesus the great punisher who will return to judge those who pervert the "true faith", Jesus who is to be worshipped and obeyed, and Jesus who helps us win our football game or find a good parking space when the mall is crowded.

How long will you keep us in suspense?

I think it is a good question with which to wrestle. To be sure our unarticulated capitulation to any of the prevailing understandings of who Jesus is has gotten the human family into a whole lot of trouble through the centuries; has seen many horrors done in Jesus' name.

I have certainly wrestled with this over time—at times far more comfortable with the distant, transcendent God as opposed to this flesh and blood combination of man and God.

I still can't claim that I have the ultimate answer to unlock this theological riddle, but I do believe that time and time again Jesus offers us a very simple and elegant answer as to how we might travel through this world with love, courage, mercy and hope and let the question answer itself.

He tells us simply to follow him. This morning he says "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me."

Of course, the challenge we still find in this simple statement is that a whole lot of people seem to have a very wide difference of opinion as to exactly where it is that Jesus leads us. But here again we hear Jesus tell us, "the works that I do in my Father's name testify to me."

What are the works that Jesus did in God's name? He healed the sick, he forgave those society and religion said should not be forgiven, he ate with people of shaky reputation as well as with those disagreed with him, he gave sight to the blind, he touched untouchables, he fed the hungry, gave water to thirsty, he broke the social and cultural barriers of his day by talking with women and enemies of Israel and he rejoiced in the Sabbath instead of making it just one more onerous rule.

He wept over the loss of his friend, he became angry at the abuses of the poor and outcast in organized religion, and he felt a gut wrenching compassion for those who were left alone with no one to care for them.

Follow me. That is what he tells us over and over and over. So to me the great question and answer to the ultimate riddle has become fairly simple---if we as the Church are people who follow Jesus, where should we go and what might we be doing?

Jesus' very life is the simple and elegant blueprint we have been given. If we study our scripture of Jesus to discover all the places into which he wants us to follow--- where would we find ourselves?

He tells us we have only to listen for his voice and follow. If we will but hear *his* voice, then we will not be lost or left alone in those dangerous places that try the heart and test the human spirit.

And we certainly won't be hating our enemies, telling the poor to just "get a job" or attempting to tell others who are not like us that they are not welcome at God's table.

And if we are paying close attention, we will see that Jesus is far from irrelevant in a world often consumed by violence, hate, and greed.

In our familiarity with the "Good Shepherd" passages that we hear this time each year, we sometimes find the context of these passages easy to forget. Over time the image of Jesus as our shepherd has become such a warm and comforting one, and rightly so.

*But we forget that even as Jesus is speaking these words, the plans to arrest and kill him are already in progress and in fact they attempt to stone him to death following this exchange in the portico of Solomon, but he escapes.

The confrontation we witness today has been brewing since Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath and restored his sight---that was his crime!

Jesus knows that he is in an increasingly hostile environment and he has already made several statements about his identity that have gone unheard by those who question him this morning.

Jesus lived in a world very much like our own. As he travels with his disciples we hear him confront and talk about events which in our own day would call terrorism where some people are slain as they worshipped in the Temple; events that mirror the bombings in Boston.

In other places he also speaks to the pain of sudden and random death after industrial accidents like the one that happened in West, Texas---he tells of people who lost their lives in a local construction accident near Jerusalem and tells his followers that life is fragile so love now, forgive now, and live now.

So when we as a country or as individuals travel through our own valley of the shadow of death, he reminds us to actively listen for the sound of his voice.

We are to listen for the sound of his voice as he calls to us amid the clamor and stampede of a world that fills our ears with messages that are often at odds with what God knows will give us true life.

We live in a world of loudly competing voices that stridently speak to us in turn of doom and hopelessness, greed and domination---voices that call for violent retribution whenever we feel threatened. And we are *all* vulnerable to these voices. That's what makes their call so insidious.

We know these voices...these are voices of destruction and disintegration for there is nothing of hope, unity or reconciliation in them.

And the real danger of listening to these voices is that they do not remain outside these church walls. We track them into our communal life like hidden time bombs.

We bring the poisonous chatter of these voices into our churches unawares and soon we appropriate them for God and we decide that they contain religious wisdom-----Much of the pain and suffering that we lay at God's feet is and has always been manmade.

But there is another voice. The voice of the True Shepherd is steady, constant and eternal. This is the voice that calls to us to follow *him* to an abundant life free of fear, hatred and reprisal. His is a still, small voice that has great power and *can* penetrate the clamor of our world.

We will know this voice because it will *always* call us to compassion, beauty and mercy. Jesus voice comes into our midst and it tells us that no matter what we must bind ourselves in love to those around us.

This voice calls us into the fold and tells us we do not stand-alone in the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus' voice penetrates our hearts with the knowledge and truth of God's love.

So here we are--- the community of faith that gathers at St Stephen's Episcopal Church in the Laurelhurst neighborhood of Seattle. We are living in a changed and still changing world--- we truly exist in a time where all of life is being redefined and in the coming year we are about to begin a quest to define who we are *as a people of God* and then shape a vision out of this understanding.

A vision is not a strategic plan---- it is a definition of purpose---a vision is meant to answer the question "if we are following Jesus--- where do we need to go and who do we need to be?"

It is true---commerce, culture, faith, religion, gender roles, how we treat our planet, how we receive our news and who we have as neighbors---all of this is being redefined.

It is potentially a very confusing time that has many people in the church rejecting change and longing for the "simpler" times of the past like the 1950's and 60's----times, by the way, that were *never* simple.

Yes, many want to remain locked in the past and this is a luxury we cannot afford. As we dream dreams for our future the question before us is:

Do we want to be a community whose purpose is simply to mourn the loss of our imagined past or do we want to be midwives who are helping the Holy Spirit give birth to new life and hope for a world that needs us now more than ever?-----}

Casting a vision for ourselves as a people of God in such a changed and confusing world *can* sound like an overwhelming job, but I say again I think Jesus offers us a beautifully simple and elegant answer: just "listen to my voice and follow me..." Amen.