

“Noticed, Named and Nurtured”

John 10: 20-30

May 11, 2025, Easter 4/C

Every day we are bombarded with messages, invitations, and images from a variety of sources, all competing for our attention. They come from the commercial and political and spiritual sectors of our society. They want to cultivate our support, bring us into the fold, or persuade us to part with our money to acquire the things they claim will bring us bliss. In a world swirling with a cacophony of voices, how is it even possible to hear the voice of God?

Short of completely shutting out the world, disconnecting from everything and everyone, we will be subject to this borage. They are committed to tracking our spending habits, observe the things we google, the programs we watch or the podcasts we listen to. Armed with this information they try to convince us that we need whatever they are selling, to be safe, or popular, or successful, or simply to feel better. They utilize all the tools at their disposal in modern technology to get to “know” so they may secure our allegiance and patronage.

Do you ever wonder how they can acquire so much information? Just for fun, I googled the question: “Is my phone listening to me?” I really didn’t have to google this because I have had many experiences that affirm this. The top hit was a simple answer: “Yes, and here’s how to stop it.” Have you ever been talking to a friend about buying something, and then within minutes ads for that item start popping up Facebook or coupons show up in your email?

Yes, our phones and other devices are listening to us. They hear our voices. They claim to “know” us and they trust that we lack the willpower to resist their temptations. This morning, we hear the story of Jesus and his declaration that he is the good shepherd, the true shepherd, the one who knows our voice and calls us by name, who invites us to follow without anything but love and justice and compassion to sell. Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.”

I want that to be true, that indeed we hear his voice and above all other voices, we follow him. But I’m not always sure that it is. John invites us to listen for Jesus’ voice. Because at the end of the day, there is only one voice we can trust; one voice that truly matters to our souls.

This is the fourth week in the Easter season. We have left the stories of Jesus’ post resurrection appearances to explore who or who does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah much earlier in his ministry. This is where Jesus begins laying the groundwork for the deadly response that is yet to come. Between now and Pentecost, the lectionary offers four passages in a row from John, all about faith and intimacy with God. Jesus’ ministry provokes a wide range of reactions: some think he’s a blaspheming, demon-possessed madman; others, the long-awaited savior. In the debate just before this week’s passage, the crowd is divided over Jesus comparing himself to a “good shepherd.” John writes, “Many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon and is out of his

mind. Why listen to him?’ Others were saying, ‘These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”

Today’s reading is part of the “good shepherd” discourse in John’s gospel. Jesus warns that there are false shepherds who mean to do the sheep harm or in any case are cowardly and self-serving, abandoning the sheep when “the wolf snatches them.” Jesus, by contrast, is “the good shepherd” who truly cares for the sheep, who “came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” The sheep learn this first-hand. They trust the good shepherd. They know his voice, and follow him.

In a cloud of competing voices, Jesus says his sheep hear *his* voice. How do we, in this time and place, hear Jesus’ voice? Does he speak to us directly? Do we hear him in the conversations we have with trusted companions? Or perhaps he speaks through someone we would otherwise overlook or dismiss simply because they are affiliated with a group or party with which we do not associate?

One writer says, “We come to recognize the voice of the Shepherd in the rhythms of Scripture, community, and daily grace.” I admit I can so easily get ramped up by the daily angry and scared voices calling us to fight against perceived injustices. We so quickly label our neighbors as enemies because they express differing political opinions or ideologies from the pundit on our favorite news channel. It’s tempting to cut off all relationships other than our inner circles because it just takes too much energy to engage with people who don’t seem to want to hear what we are saying. We try to make our sheepfold as small as we can manage and with people whom we know and trust. But there’s a voice that calls us in a different direction, through a different gate, walking a different way.

We have heard, in the resurrection appearances, how people didn’t always recognize Jesus (Mary in the garden, the disciples on the road, the men fishing in the night). We learn how recognition comes in relationship. The calling of a name, the breaking of bread. The sheep follow because they *know* his voice.

Recognitions comes in relationship. Relationships are not automatic. They take time to cultivate. They require openness, vulnerability, and trust that ultimately leads to intimacy. We know the shepherd’s voice because we have committed to follow in his way. He did not buy or coerce our allegiance. We have chosen to follow and as we deepen that relationship, we seek more opportunities to hear his voice. For many of us, this is a lifelong journey that we could not foresee ever abandoning. For others, this relationship has taken twists and turns, had times of abandonment and returning to the fold to reengage and rekindle the relationship that ultimately calls us into new life. Even when we have taken a detour or hiatus, Jesus never abandons us but calls our name and holds a space for us.

“I have told you,” Jesus says, “and you do not believe. Jesus is referring to his being the Messiah. Even if he hasn’t yet spoken directly to this question in public; he’s said privately that he is the Messiah. So, when Jesus says to his disciples, “I have told you,” he doesn’t necessarily mean with words, he means with acts of healing, feeding, and restoration, “signs” that, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, clearly proclaim who he is.

For those with eyes to see and ears to hear the message is abundantly clear. How we respond is something else. There is a difference between knowing something or someone and having that knowledge or relationship transform who we are. How does one “get it.” Perhaps you have had an experience where someone else “gets it” and keeps trying to help you see it. Then, it clicks, everything becomes clear, and now you cannot unsee or unknow it. That is what is happening with Jesus’ followers. It is clear that not everyone recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. Do they lack the right perspective, the right information, the right “signs,” the right arguments? No, Jesus says, this is beyond having it right. The critics or skeptics don’t recognize his voice; they don’t sense his love and care, therefore no argument or sign will persuade them. His sheep, by contrast, know his voice; we see and hear the eloquence of his works; we trust and follow. He promises never to forsake us (not even death can separate us!); he assures us that, “we are one, just as my Father and I are one. No wolf can snatch them away and so they can rest assured, confident in my companionship.”

The writers at the SALT project talk about this knowing in a beautiful way. They liken our ability to recognize the shepherd’s voice to a musical experience. They write, “Asked to define the rhythm known as ‘swing,’ Louis Armstrong famously replied, ‘If you have to ask, you’ll never know.’ His point wasn’t to exclude anyone from understanding swing; rather, his point was that verbally defining it isn’t the path to understanding it. On the contrary, the way to understand swing is to hear it, to dance to it, to get a feel for it. In the end, swing really isn’t something that can be defined or explained. It has to be felt, engaged, experienced.

Jesus’ point in this passage is similar. When it comes to his messiahship, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, there’s already plenty of ‘evidence’ on the table (teaching, healing, signs). But that’s just it: without such ears and eyes, no amount of evidence or argument will do. Claims have their counterclaims; signs have their skeptics. Wisdom and wonders can point us in helpful directions, of course, but in the end, everything comes down to this: a vital, intuitive, experiential sense of love and trust.”

Some people ask incredulously, “tell us plainly who you are.” If you have to ask, you don’t get it. If you need an explanation about swing, it has not yet touched your soul. When you get it, you get it and there’s no going back, there’s no unseeing or unhearing it. The sheep know the shepherd. The shepherd calls us by name.

While the powerful brokers of his age sought Jesus’ death, he came to bring new life, to liberate, to save, and to deliver. Jesus came to love, not just some, but all who had ears to hear and eyes to see, and a soul to feel. Love is the source of his glory. That love shines in the midst of violence, lies, persecution, and despair, and no government, corrupted officials, or betraying friends can overcome it. The glorious victory emerges as Jesus reveals that even death cannot contain love. Love does not die, it rises and lives again.

Jesus invites his disciples to follow in the way of that love. In the absence of his physical presence, we continue to move forward, day by day, as the body of Christ, responsible for leading, inviting, and loving as he did. We are noticed, named and nurtured in his love. In the

same way that he sent his disciples out to heal and deliver, Jesus also sends them into the world to love. It begins in community.

What then is our response? What proof do we offer the world that we are part of the fold? How do we extend hospitality? How does the church organize to reach out and create a more inclusive and engaging community within? How do we share the love and justice of Jesus? It begins with a name and a blessing and a response. It is a lifelong pursuit to which we gladly and graciously give ourselves. Do you hear him calling your name? Come, let us share that love with a world hungry and anxious to receive it. May it be so. Amen