

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church
2368 Eggert Road, Tonawanda, NY

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John 10:22-30

“My sheep hear my voice.”

We live in a noisy culture. Do you agree with that? It seems that we are not at ease with our surroundings unless we have noise. When we are in our cars, the radio or cd player is on, often at high volume. At home, the television may be turned on first thing in the morning and not turned off until late at night. When we are walking, running, jogging, roller blading, bicycling, what do we have attached to our heads but earphones connected to a Walkman, i-pod, cd player, or what have you. It seems as though we welcome and are content to live with constant noise.

Two men were walking along a crowded and noisy city sidewalk. Suddenly, one of the men remarked, “Listen to the lovely sound of that cricket.” But the other man could not hear the sound. He asked his friend how he could hear the sound of a cricket amid the roar of the traffic and the sound of the people. The first man, who was a zoologist, had trained himself to hear the sounds of nature. He didn't explain to his friend how he could hear the sound of the cricket, but instead, reached into his pocket, pulled out a half-dollar coin, dropped it onto the sidewalk. The two men watch intently as a dozen people began to look for the coin they heard clanking around amid the sounds of the traffic and the sounds of the crowded city living. The zoologist turned to his friend and said, “We hear what we listen for.”

“We hear what we listen for.” This statement begs the question, “For what is it that we are listening?” We are so easily distracted by the rush of the modern world that it seems as though we are deaf to what is important. Then maybe, we are not deaf, but rather we hear only that which we want to hear. I believe that's called selective hearing, about which Barbie says I am quite good at. We hear only that which we want to hear, such as that half-dollar hitting the sidewalk. It is not that we have a hearing problem, but rather we prefer to tune in to all the sounds and words of the world as it rushes by. We listen to only that which we want to listen and far too much of that listening is centered on the world. We tune in the world. We tune out Jesus; we tune out the Lord. When he calls us, we choose not to hear

him, for we are giving our attention to the world. Jesus wants us to follow him, but we are more intent on listening to the world.

During the Palestinian uprising of the later 1980's, the Israeli Army decided to punish a village near Bethlehem for not paying its taxes. The officer in command ordered the rounding up of all the animals and had them placed in a large barbed wire pen. Later in the week, the officer in command was approached by a woman who begged him to release her flock of twenty-five sheep. She argued that since her husband was dead, the animals were her only source of livelihood. He pointed to the pen containing hundreds of animals, and humorously quipped, that it was impossible to give her the sheep because he could not find her animals among so many. She asked if she could separate the animals herself, and if successful, would he be willing to let her take her sheep.

A soldier opened the gate and the woman's son produced a small wooden flute. He played a simple tune again and again. Soon, heads began popping up across the pen. The boy continued his music and walked home, followed by his flock of exactly twenty-five sheep. As the sheep knew the voice of their boy shepherd, so are we to follow Christ, to know his voice, and to follow him.

From out of the pen of hundreds of sheep, one can just imagine the noise. Yet, in spite of the noise, the sheep heard their shepherd and responded. I invite you to turn with me to page 1072 of the pew Bible, chapter 10, verses 3-5:

3 To him the doorkeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

4 When he has put forth all his own, he goes ahead them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

5 A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Believers are compared to sheep. Jesus said that believers, like sheep, are to know the voice of God and distinguish that voice from "ungodly" voices that give wrong guidance. It is characteristic of sheep not to know where they are going. They must be led. Human beings are no different. We think we know where we are going, but without God, we become lost, lost to eternal death.

In time of danger, the sheep will huddle around the shepherd for protection. On our family room wall is a poster Barbara gave me some years ago. Pictured is a shepherd with sheep at his feet. This shepherd is standing unyielding, looking directly into the eyes of two wolves hovering at the top of a nearby hill. The caption is a quote from Psalm 91, verses 1-3:

1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,

2 will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;

From Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, therefore, I lack nothing." I have nothing to fear, for the Lord provides me with all that I need to do his will, and lo, he is with me to the end of the age. What more could we ask? What more do we need?

I invite you to turn with me to page 1080, John, chapter 16, second column, verse 13:

13 When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on his own initiative, but whatever He hears he will speak, and He will disclose to you what is to come.

God not only wants to communicate with us, but it is his nature to share what His will for us is, and he does so through the Holy Spirit. The question begging to be asked is, "Are we listening?" It is by our own decision to be saved that will save us. It is by our own response to come to the risen Lord that will save us. God the Father's gift of Jesus Christ, His only Son, is acceptable to only those who are aware of their own need for saving, for salvation. When we realize our own brokenness, our own need for salvation, then we listen to the voice of our rescuer, our shepherd. Until then, we do not listen.

I held a Red Cross Senior Life saving certification until I left teaching some seventeen years ago. One of the things we were taught in our training is that often it is quite difficult to save a person from drowning as they will physically fight with the rescuer. A defense toward this behavior is to leave the person alone, but stay with that person from a short distance away, moving in only when that person calms down, usually from sheer exhaustion. When more calm, a rational level of response is achieved. It is

then that the person can be instructed what to do, or at that time allow the rescuer to intervene. Does not God work in the same manner with us? And we see this same type of approach in today's reading. We are out there in the world, thrashing around, believing we can make it in our own; that we can save ourselves. No matter what Jesus does, His life saving efforts is rejected. It is only through the failure of our own efforts to save ourselves that we finally accept the life-saving grace of Jesus Christ.

A man was having difficulty communicating with his wife (so what else is new?) and concluded that *she* was becoming hard of hearing. So he decided to conduct a test without her knowing it. One evening, he sat in a chair on the far side of the room. Her back was to him and she could not see him. Very quietly, he whispered, "Can you hear me?" (1) There was no response. Moving a little closer, he asked a gain, "Can you hear me now?" (2) (A question that reminds us of the cell phone commercial.) Still no reply. Quietly he edged closer and whispered the same words, (3) but still no answer. Finally, he moved right behind her chair and said, "Can you hear me now?" (4) To his surprise and chagrin, she responded with much irritation in her voice, "For the fourth time, yes!" You see, the hearing problem may not be with God not speaking, but with us not listening!

I invite you to turn with me to page 1227, the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John, chapter 3, at the bottom of the second column, verse 20:

20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me.

When I do parish visitations, after I knock on the door, I hear from the other side, "Who is it?" I announce who I am, and quite often hear, "Oh, come right in, Father." Why is it that I am granted entrance? Because when they heard my voice, they recognized it and felt safe in inviting me in. Notice in verse 20, that Jesus knocks on the door and speaks to us. Do we not recognize his voice and leave Jesus outside, or is our response one of recognition and welcome, "Oh, come right in, my Lord and Savior, and make my heart your home."?

A shepherd was herding his flock in a remote pasture when suddenly a brand new BMW appeared out of a cloud of dust. The driver, a young man in a Broni suit, Gucci shoes, Ray Ban sunglasses, leaned out of the window and asked the shepherd, "If I tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your

flock, will you give me one?" The shepherd looked at the man, then looks at his peacefully grazing flock and calmly answers, "Sure."

The young man parks his car, whips out his notebook computer, connects it to a cell phone, and then surfs the net to a NASA page where he calls up a Global Position Satellite navigational system, scans the area, and opens up a database and Excel spread sheets with complex formulas. He sends an e-mail on his Blackberry and, after a few minutes, receives a response. Finally, he prints a 150-page report on his hi-tech, miniaturized printer, then turns to the shepherd and says, "You have exactly 1,586 sheep." "That is correct, take one of the sheep", says the shepherd.

He watches as the young man selects one of the animals and bundles it into his car. Then the shepherd says to the young man, "If I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me back my sheep?" "Okay, why not," he answers. "Clearly you are a consultant," says the shepherd. "Why, that's correct," says the young man, "but how did you guess that?"

"No guessing required," answered the shepherd. "You turned up here although nobody called you. You want to get paid for the answer to a question I already knew, and it's obvious you don't know anything about my business. Now give me back my dog!"

The shepherd knows not only knows his business, but also his flock, and protects them. The shepherd leads his sheep out of danger. Jesus is calling us and as well as others to follow him, to do his will, to trust him to lead us out of spiritual danger. Jesus desires everyone to have eternal life. It is Jesus who said, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." Yet, sometimes the problem is not that we, the sheep of the pasture, do not recognize the voice of the shepherd. But rather, we recognize it, and refuse to listen. We have a "selective hearing" issue.

To listen, to truly listen, takes much concentration. I refer to the opening story of dropping a half-dollar onto the sidewalk. Required is intensive and acute listening to hear the coin rolling on the sidewalk. It takes intensive listening to shut out the irrelevant noises to isolate that of the rolling coin.

As a hospital chaplain, it was often a very exhausting experience to listen critically to a seriously ill patient. The chaplain not only needs to hear what the patient is saying, but also needs to discern what lies underneath that

which is being heard. The chaplain needs to discern the spiritual status of the individual while listening. To accomplish such a task requires critical and intense listening. So it is with us and our listening to Jesus. It is very easy to listen to the world. There is so much out there that is constantly in our face. No wonder Jesus said that when we wish to communicate with Him, go into a closed room. Go where it is quiet. There, we can shut out the extraneous noise of the world and listen, critically and intensely listen to the voice of Jesus. Just as the zoologist trained himself to isolate sounds, so can we train ourselves to shut out the superfluous sounds of this world to hear the voice of Jesus. We can do it. But, it takes practice. We must be pro-active and intentional in our endeavor to hear the voice of Jesus calling us into His sheepfold, calling us into His kingdom.

I invite you to turn with me to page 1207, The Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 13, right hand column, verse 20:

20 Now the God of peace who brought up from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord,

21 equip you in every good thing to do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever.

And the people of God said, "Amen."