

Prayer: Oh God, we are so preoccupied with counting sheep that we forget how much we need a shepherd. We are so occupied with numbers and statistics that we forget to leave the counting to you. You already know the sum of the hairs on the very heads that you have anointed. You know our days, our challenges, our successes and our needs. Today, we confess that our greatest need is for a shepherd. And the lesson we have yet to learn is how to be your sheep. Amen.

(Slide #1) “Learning To Hear Our Shepherd’s Voice: Jesus, The Good Shepherd”

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, and there is probably no other scripture more comforting or more beloved than the **23rd Psalm** along with the Gospel reading from John 10:14: “I am the good shepherd, and I know my own and my own know me.”

I’ll bet many of you remember, as I do, a picture hanging in your Sunday School room depicting Jesus, the Good Shepherd, **(Slide #2)** carrying a lamb on his shoulders, and being taught its message: ***we are loved by Jesus and we are carried by that love.***

I daresay most of us can recite the 23rd Psalm from memory, and have probably done so over and over when the circumstances of our lives seemed to overwhelm us—those times when we felt we were, indeed, walking through the valley of the shadow of death. When we recall those words, we know we are not alone.

In Jesus’ parable of the good shepherd, he says that the sheep listen to his voice. Now, what is interesting is that he is speaking of the sheep of other folds, not the ones in front of him. It is in the first part of the chapter where he talks about us hearing and knowing and following his voice. This is definitely a continuation of that idea, but now others are included. Who are these others? We don’t really know. There is lots of speculation about who these other folds might represent. But the truth is, we don’t know. Jesus often hints that determining who is in and who is out is not really our job. We are to invite and include as widely as possible.

(Slide #3) April 22 was Earth Day, and this is the Sunday designated for the observance of that event. We are called to partner with God in the stewardship of all creation. Too often, we see our worship space as the be all and end all of our responsibilities when we seek to encounter God. But we can hear the voice of God through the natural world. If we are to take seriously hearing God through the world around us, then we have to take seriously the care of the planet and all His creations. Amen!

I’ve been reflecting on the power and gift of being known by God. **(SLIDE #4)** There’s a wonderful Zulu term “Sawubona” – it means literally, “I see you,” but it goes beyond physical sight to mean “I acknowledge you.” This notion has never been more important than it is in today’s culture, where we’re so often just a number, and our hustle and bustle keep us from taking the time to truly acknowledge those with whom we interact on a daily basis: our family, our friends, the person at the cash register, our waitress. Instead of letting them pass us by unacknowledged, how much better if we could remember the wonderful words by Rosemary Crow from her song *Weave*: ***“Now the Christ in me greets the Christ in Thee.”***

When we acknowledge another sheep in the fold, we are truly one in Christ!

But John’s Gospel message is about so much more than just being personally known by God. It means that with all our flaws and shortcomings, all our eccentricities, all our sins of commission and omission, we are loved and we are forgiven. What incredibly Good News!

But how well do we know God? The sentence from John’s gospel doesn’t stop with the declaration, “I know my own.” It goes on to say, “And my own know me.” For me, this brought up a whole new set of questions that began to be a bit unsettling:

- How well do I really know God?
- How can I get to know God more intimately?
- Does God still speak to us?
- Will I recognize the voice of my shepherd when he calls and pull me safely into the fold or to be his conduit for love in the world?
- How do I distinguish my shepherd's voice from the other voices that bombard me constantly?

We believe in a living God, with whom we may have a relationship. How else can we get to know God better if not by cultivating that relationship?

- There must be connection.
- There must be communication.
- There must be conversation.

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And that implies something that’s two-way. Most of us are pretty good at speaking to God (or perhaps at God). But I daresay we can all work on our God-listening skills.

(SLIDE #5) Thus begs the question: how do we hear the voice of God without sounding irrational? What does the voice of God sound like? How do we hear that voice? It has to begin by listening to the scripture text that gives us an idea of how God speaks, the kinds of things God is interested in, what God seeks from us. Bible study and small conversation groups around biblical texts is an excellent means of developing this listening skill. To hear the voice of God, we must draw closer to God through our attention to the Word.

Of course, another avenue for hearing the voice of God is other Christians. We hear God’s truth through those around us. Sometimes revelation comes through something a friend or leader says. Sometimes this is through preachers and teachers, of course, but often an unexpected person can startle us with a truth. This is why we need to recover the practice of testimony. We need to listen to one another; we need to hear the faith struggles and the understandings that come from those who occupy the pews next to us, from those who are viewing a screen at the same time we are viewing it. We need to be open and in the habit of listening to those who are different from us, who have a different perspective, who come from a different background, are of a different race. This is so we can cultivate ears for hearing the voice of God in different people and in different settings. We want to round out that voice and hear it in its fullness.

Have you ever been in a crowd of people, perhaps a busy store or shopping center, when you heard the voice of your child—or perhaps the voice of your spouse or a friend—call your name? You pick it out of other noises immediately, because you *know* that voice.

I used to think all birds sounded alike, but birdwatchers can identify birdcalls and songs even without seeing the bird. How wonderful to be as confident about recognizing the voice of Jesus, our shepherd, when he calls your name.

Well, I *do* believe God still speaks to us and that we can cultivate the ability to recognize His voice in the midst of all the other noise. Christian writings, scripture, and personal anecdotes from devout Christians are clear that God has spoken to us throughout history and still speaks.

In scripture, we find:

From Job: *For God speaks in one way, and in two, though humanity does not perceive it. (Job 33:14)*

From Isaiah: *And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. (Isaiah 30:21)*

From Jeremiah: *Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known. (Jeremiah 33:3)*

From John: *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:13)*

So, if God's talking, why can't we hear His voice?

I think we often have preconceived ideas about how God might speak to us, so we don't recognize it when He speaks in ordinary or quiet ways. We're waiting for God's voice to come out of a burning bush when it's much more likely to come from our next-door neighbor...yes, even the one that gets on our nerves! We also forget to expect responses to our side of the conversation with God. Sometimes, we're so busy talking, we forget to listen!

Once we realize there's a two-way conversation going on, we can begin to enjoy the thrill of recognizing God's voice as a comforter and guide in dealing with life's challenges. We will never be alone again! I'd like to suggest a few ways God might be speaking to us. (SLIDE #6)

1. **God speaks through Scripture.** The Bible gives a great deal of guidance on the things we encounter in life, so familiarity with its teaching can result in the right verse and message coming to mind just when we need it. Hannah Whitehall Smith, in her classic *The Christian's Secret Of A Happy Life*, tells us clearly to look for messages from God in scripture before anywhere else.
2. **God speaks through our intuition.** This is a combination of our thoughts and our gut feelings. It can be thoughts and feelings that come to us during prayer, or they can come out of the blue. It takes practice to discern which things are messages from God and which are just wishful thinking (or worse, messages from the Tempter).
3. **God speaks through others.** Sometimes this is the hardest to recognize. We should be careful not to pre-judge who God might use to deliver a message we need to hear!
4. **God speaks through books, letters, movies, or music.** I find this happens most often when I am intentionally praying about a situation or asking for an answer to a question. Uncannily (or so it seems at the time), I'll get a letter, read an article, watch a video, or be sent some other resource that speaks very specifically to what I've asked God about.
5. **God speaks through circumstances in our lives.** Sometimes the guidance from God comes in the form of a slamming door. At other times it comes in the form of an opportunity. We should be open to the possibility that either might be a message from God.

The invitation is to listen, to carefully listen. But not only listen, we expect to hear. What a radical thought that is for those who gather to worship this day. God is speaking to you! Not just to followers with more authority, not just to those who are farther along the journey of faith, but to you as well. The real question for us today is not, "Will God speak to me, to us today?" Instead, will we listen for that voice that is speaking? Jesus doesn't say, "Listen and maybe I'll have something to say." He says, "Listen to my voice." "I am speaking" is the implied message, so pay attention.

So, as we depart from church today in the comfort of knowing we are a sheep of God's own fold, a lamb of God's own flock, a sinner of God's own redeeming, we also leave knowing we are cherished, protected, and guided by the Great Shepherd. We leave knowing that we are FORGIVEN for our sins.

(Slide #7) And what better way to express our own love and gratitude for this incredible knowledge than a renewed determination to uphold our side of the relationship by listening for His voice and responding with gratitude and obedience. "I am the good shepherd, and I know my own and my own know me." Thanks be to God! AMEN!

"Learning To Hear Our Shepherd's Voice: Jesus, The Good Shepherd"

**THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD –
THAT'S RELATIONSHIP!**

I SHALL NOT WANT – THAT'S SUPPLY!

**HE MAKES ME TO LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES
- THAT'S REST!**

**HE LEADS ME BESIDE STILL WATERS –
THAT'S REFRESHMENT!**

HE RESTORES MY SOUL – THAT'S HEALING!

**HE LEADS ME IN THE PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS -
THAT'S GUIDANCE!**

FOR HIS NAME SAKE – THAT'S PURPOSE!

**YEA, THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF
THE SHADOW OF DEATH, I WILL FEAR NO EVIL –
THAT'S PROTECTION!**

**FOR THOU ART WITH ME – THAT'S
FAITHFULNESS!**

**THY ROD AND THY STAFF THEY COMFORT ME -
THAT'S COMFORT!**

**THOU PREPARE A TABLE BEFORE ME IN THE
PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES –
THAT'S HOPE!**

**THOU ANOINTS MY HEAD WITH OIL –
THAT'S CONSECRATION!**

MY CUP RUNS OVER – THAT'S ABUNDANCE!

**SURELY GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW
ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE - THAT'S BLESSING!**

**AND I WILL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD -
THAT'S SECURITY!**

FOREVER – THAT'S ETERNITY!

The Twenty-Third Psalm
so beautifully describes
the relationship our
wonderful Savior has
with us, His people.

Many of the Psalms, if
not all of them, are
prophetic in some way.