

Bailey, our seven year old daughter, told me on Thursday night that while on her bike ride she discovered that the goslings- the baby geese- had been born and were out and about with their geese parents in the park. The next morning I was out early for my morning walk with my friend and her two hunting dogs, and we encountered a Mama goose and her four goslings following behind her. And boy did we encounter her! She hissed and hawed at us- letting out a horribly frightening and intimidating sound- on repeat. Obviously she felt that her babies were being threatened by the dogs though they weren't too close nor barking or trying to get at them. Nevertheless, this mama wasn't having it! She brought a whole new meaning to the words "Mother Goose." It made me think of Jesus as the Shepherd, the great protector and guider of his sheep, in a much deeper way. While the Mama Goose didn't talk, I heard and understood the protection in her voice, as did her babies. She was going to do all she could to keep anyone from snatching up her babies.

Where are we assured of the protection and promises and presence of God through the Resurrection of Christ in our lives today? Here in today's Gospel story in John is a great place to start with one of the most ancient representations of Christ- the Shepherd. Today's Gospel story starts out with Jesus in Jerusalem in late December on the porch or portico on the east side of the Temple known as "Solomon's Porch" or the "Porch of Judgment-" "where Solomon made many of his judgments and called for justice for those who were brought before him. And here is Jesus physically embodying justice in this historical place of justice- something his life and teachings were all about" (Karyn Wiseman,

workingpreacher.org). Not only was Jesus walking through this porch, but it was also during the Festival of lights, more familiar to us as Hanukkah (vv. 22-23). Let us read together from God's Word but first let us pray. **PRAY. READ. John 10:22-30.**

Into this setting of temple porch talk comes another identity question for Jesus. "Be straight up with us, Jesus. Are you for the real the Messiah or not?" (v. 24). Have you ever had the need to question authority or test the limits of your perceived reality or have asked for proof for statements made to you? I know I have and I do. This is what is happening in this text. Jesus doesn't answer their question real plainly though. Truth be told Jesus has given the people around him numerous examples of who he is. "He has performed miracles and has become the Word made flesh. He has others question his identity repeatedly. Yet, the questions go beyond his identity here. They also are questioning if Jesus' power is verifiably from God (v. 25), and as I hear that doubt creep into their questions, I am reminded that doubt is a constant companion to faith" (Wiseman).

It's important to remember when Jesus speaks of shepherds and sheep, he was speaking to people who had everyday experiences with sheep or lambs or goats. This metaphor especially hit home for the folks gathered in Jesus' day. Regardless of the time and lack of knowledge of sheep and shepherds, I wonder if it still hits home with those of us gathered today? I believe it does. Maybe this is why the 23rd Psalm is the most popular request to be read by the hospital bed or at a funeral?! The image of

God as Shepherd...Jesus as Shepherd...is a powerful one. We're told right before today's text that Jesus is the good Shepherd, who lay down his life for the sheep. He knows his own and his own know him, just as the Father knows him and Jesus knows the Father (John 10:15). Jesus knows the sheep. Jesus knows us. Jesus not only knows us, but calls us by name and leads us out (John 10:3b). Jesus chooses to be in relationship with us, just as he is in relationship with the Father. How comforting to know our Lord...our Shepherd knows us by name and does not abandon us in our times of need.

I read recently that "a shepherd gives her own unique call (a short 5 to 10 second chant or song) to guide her sheep along. Or he may use a village style bamboo flute on which he plays a special tune. A third way to call sheep is simply to cry out 'Haa, haa, ta'o, ta'o.' What is clear is that recognizing the voice of the shepherd is crucial. The sheep 'know his voice.' When there are new sheep to the flock though, they have to be trained to listen for the new voice of the shepherd" (Kenneth Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*). Even though my grandfather was an egg farmer and had lots of chicken and some cows, I have never been around a lot of sheep and so I decided to google some videos of sheep knowing their shepherd's voice. It was wild. Several tried calling out to the sheep but only frightened them or rendered no response whatsoever while at the mere sound of their shepherd's voice, the sheep would immediately respond and be guided in the required direction.

We believe that the voice of God comes to each of us and to all of us. Yet, how do we hear the voice of God in the midst of other competing voices? “For example, there are voices that tell us how to grow closer to God: by having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or morality. By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on only one thing: that we are known by the shepherd: a voice that liberates rather than oppresses” (Elisabeth Johnson, workingpreacher.org). Sometimes we hear that liberating voice through the voices of others. The call can be communal at times as community affirms what we hear. This is a celebration of community, the village that it takes to raise a child or make a disciple.

I’m reading a book by Yolanda Pierce entitled, *In My Grandmother’s House*. In it, Pierce describes being in her grandmother’s house growing up, where faith was real and tangible. As a child, Pierce thought of Jesus as a very close neighbor, because calling on Jesus was like calling on Miss Priscilla next door. Pierce writes, “The Jesus of my grandmother’s house was not just ‘Lord;’ he was friend and confidant. Jesus came by to visit us on a regular basis, for much of my early life. I thought everybody knew Jesus as a good neighbor who visited often. We called on Jesus when the groceries ran low or when someone’s fever ran high. We called on Jesus when the rent check was due or when death visited and laid us low. And we called on Jesus in celebration and in times of joy-

when bodies were healed and prayers were answered and relationships were restored. My grandmother called on the name of Jesus because for her, there was power just in the name.” What strikes me most thus far in Pierce’s book about black women, their faith, and stories they inherit, is that at the heart of their understanding of God, the needs of real people- the belonging of people is put before doctrine- what people believe.

That’s what John is saying in today’s text. Belonging before belief. “At first glance, Jesus’ reply might appear to suggest that belonging to him depends on believing in him. But in fact, what Jesus says is *exactly the opposite*: you struggle to believe because you don’t consent to belong. In other words, belief doesn’t come first. It can’t come first. Belonging does. According to this text, whatever belief I arrive at in this life will come not from a creed or a cleverly worded sermon, but from the daily, hourly business of belonging to Jesus’ flock- of walking in the footsteps of the Shepherd, living in the company of fellow sheep, and listening in real time for the voice of the One whose classroom is rocky hills, hidden pastures, and deeply shadowed valleys” (Thomas). God’s grace, redemption, and love enter our lives in mysterious ways, especially in the midst of our own brokenness. Here Jesus invites us all to our deepest place of belonging, guiding us with tenderness and helping us to trust in an abiding eternal hope. The great exchange of mutual love that occurs in the relationships between the Father and the Shepherd and the Shepherd and the sheep is palpable. The relationship between the sheep and the shepherd is based on what the shepherd does and who the shepherd is, not vice versa. “Sheep know their shepherds because they are his; they walk, graze, feed and sleep in his shadow, beneath his

rod and staff, within constant earshot of his voice. So we believe in the Christ as we belong to him- as we allow ourselves to become fully and deeply his. Jesus walks ahead of us, and we will only learn his path by walking it. There is no belonging from the outside; Christianity is not a spectator sport. *Belong*, Jesus says. Consent to belong. Belief will follow” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net).

In preparing for today’s sermon, I asked Elaine about listening to Christ’s voice in her life as she walks with Christ. She said that she doesn’t know exactly when she first heard Christ’s voice, as it’s always been in the mix. Hers wasn’t a dramatic or direct call from God. It’s been more about trusting and walking in faith within her community. She recognizes her Shepherd’s voice through the voice of others, in particular, women of faith who have guided her as sheepdogs, if you will, in her life. She reminisced about working as a teenager at Buncombe St. Methodist Church with Olene Civils, the Director of Christian Education. She also mentioned Helen Crotwell and Susan Leonard Ray- among many women along the way- who listened to Jesus’ voice and helped bridge it to Elaine. Their voices were the voice of Jesus for her, as she was able to hear and recognize Christ through them.

“I suspect that Jesus’ answer was not what the people in the temple wanted to hear that day. They wanted to believe from the outside. They wanted a version of proof that would not require them to step into the smelly sheep pen and muck around with the other sheep. They wanted certainty without risk. Truth without trust. A Messiah who would provide not provoke; visit not meddle” (Thomas). Yet, Jesus says there

are two marks to being part of his flock: 1) hearing his voice, and 2) following him. It's a smelly sheep pen, indeed! Many of you have been afflicted by disease and lost loved ones or have suffered from addiction and known loss or have not felt protected from loved ones who abused or belittled you. It is into this context that I invite you to hear the voice of the shepherd and to follow him in your life. "Amidst all the other voices that evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the good shepherds is a voice of promise- a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God's own" (Johnson). How do we do this? "One doesn't simply profess belief in such weighty and mysterious things- one lives into them, questions into them, believes into them, grows into them" (Thomas). We do this by being in community and reminding one another that we're God's children, and we belong here- we're welcome in this place- even if we don't quite know what we believe. We do this because in life and in death, we belong to God through our risen Lord and Savior, the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.