5/11-12/19 Listen to Jesus Rev. Amy Haines

John 10:22-30 Mother’s Day/High Attendance

A mother’s voice is the first voice a baby will learn to hear. From in the womb to newborn lullabies, infants will often be calmed by the sound of their mother’s voice.

Yet there comes a time --and with three children I know this to be true--when children learn to tune out the sound of their mother’s voice. I don’t know if there is any scientific data to prove it, but I think somewhere between the toddler and teen years, kids perfect tuning mom out until mom’s voice rises decibels and an invitation becomes an ultimatum. Can I get an amen from anyone else who has experienced this phenomenon? Kids might listen to a call to dinner, but ignore a command to clean their room. Teens might hear rules as restrictive, instead of hearing the love behind their protection.

Only as teens become adults, and sometimes parents themselves, do they look back and recognize that sometimes mothers were wise and worth listening to. Then on days like today, pray for those who wish they could hear their mother’s voice offer advice just one more time.

Think back over your life. Consider parents and siblings, teachers and preachers, children and neighbors, friends and coworkers. What voices offered you sound advice? Who all did you listen to well? And which voices did you learn to tune out?

How good of a listener are you? Do you give someone else your full attention? Or do you have selective hearing? Are you fully engaged when you listen? Or are you easily distracted?

We are not the first to struggle with listening.

…The story is told of Franklin Roosevelt, when president of the United States, hated the long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. So one day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning."

The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir."

It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Nonplussed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

--Source Unknown. Sermonillustrations.com: listening

Every day we are surrounded by distractions. Every day we are surrounded by noise and motion that can pull our attention away from one another. We then listen for sound bytes instead of an entire story. We talk over each other in our rush to be heard in the limited time we have with one another. We miss the stories of hope and sounds of joy that can surround us every day.

…Debra Fine once wrote about 8-year-old Nick who told his dad about his day: “Dad, I had a great day at school. We had art class today, and I painted a cool picture of the mountains. We played soccer during gym, and I scored a goal. And guess what? They served pizza for lunch.”

Looking at his dad, whose nose was in the newspaper, Nick said, “Dad, you’re not listening.”

His dad replied, “Yes I am, Son. You painted a picture of the mountains, scored a goal in soccer, and had pizza for lunch.”

Nicolas was unappeased. “No, Dad; that’s not it. You’re not listening to me with your eyes.”

-preaching.com:listening from *Turning Point Daily Devotional*, June 30, 2012

Substitute cell phones and electronic devices for newspapers and that story still plays out in homes and restaurants every single day, as families, couples and even coworkers do not listen with their eyes.

Good listening is a lost art form in our world today.

Yet, as we gather here for worship, as we lament the ways we don’t listen to one another, Jesus still calls us to listen to his voice. To hear his call to live by his ways. Are we willing to live for him by listening to him? That is the challenge of this fourth Sunday of Easter.

Our Scripture today is part of a larger passage in the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, one who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him, one who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep, and one whose sheep listen to his voice.

Jesus’ words in John 10 always draw me back to the words of Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul: he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you art with me; your rod and staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies: you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

At first glance, God as Shepherd is a kind, calm, comforting image. Yet look deeper, and God as Shepherd is a deeply loving, deeply relational, deeply sacrificial image. Look deeper, and you will see a God who journeys with us through even the darkest nights and the deepest valleys of our lives. Look deeper, and you will see a God who constantly calls us by name to follow him with radical trust in the present and into the future. Look deeper, and you will see a God who is willing to lay down his life for us, through God’s own son’s death on a cross.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd.

Willing to know us. Willing to protect us. Willing to call us to follow him.

To truly listen to and follow Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we need to better understand this metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep.

From the earliest Bible times, the job of a shepherd was never one of luxury or leisure. Often shepherds were poor younger siblings who had no other way to earn a living. They often cared for sheep that someone else owned, battling loneliness, predators, and the elements. To be a shepherd was a thankless job that no one else really wanted.

The job description of a shepherd includes many responsibilities. A shepherd takes the sheep from green pasture to green pasture in order for the sheep to eat. A shepherd prepares the pasture before the sheep eat, doing what is called setting the table, meaning the shepherd must remove from the grazing pastures any poisonous weeds or scorpion nests. A shepherd is always on alert, willing to defend all in the herd, but especially watch out for the weak, the young, and the old, the sheep most vulnerable to attack from wolves and other predators.

A shepherd also keeps an eye out for any sheep that wander away or any that may be injured and need treatment. A shepherd knows the sheep by name in order for the sheep to follow the shepherd’s voice.

A good shepherd is constantly on watch protecting the sheep, caring for them, knowing them each by name.

As long as there are sheep there will always be a need for shepherds, for sheep are not the smartest of animals. Sheep don’t see very well, and they easily stray. Sheep eat too much or drink contaminated water. A nibble here, a nibble there, and before you know it the sheep is lost or has fallen into a ravine. And when they fall, they can’t get up without some shepherd assistance; their wool is too heavy to allow them to right themselves! Sheep like to band together, but they will also follow each other aimlessly, which can often lead to trouble.

Sheep are easily scare, and when scared, they will scatter. Yet when they scatter is when they are most prone to get lost, get hurt or get eaten by predators.

Sheep are not the smartest of animals, but according to studies, they are not the dumbest animals, either, especially when it comes to knowing who feeds them.

..A study from Cambridge, England showed that sheep have remarkable memories, able to pick out a particular face in a line of pictures, if that face is associated with a food reward. Some of the sheep in the study could remember up to 50 images for as long as two years.

Sheep also have keen hearing, which makes it possible for them to discern the unique voice of their shepherd from among many others, and they will always move toward the person they perceive to be a friend, particularly if that friend feeds the sheep.

-- Homiletics 5-2-04 “Jesus is Ovine Lingual”

Barbara Brown Taylor once observed of a Midwest American sheep farmer that "it never ceased to amaze him, growing up, that he could walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step foot in the fold without causing pandemonium."

-- eSermons.com

In many ways, sheep are just like us—sometimes smart, sometimes scared, sometimes straying away, and sometimes staying on course following the voice of the shepherd. No wonder time and again the Bible calls God’s people God’s sheep or God’s flock!

As God’s flock, we are called to learn to listen to the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd. We are called to listen for Jesus’ voice so that we follow where he leads us, not wandering down another path following our own desires or following a voice that seeks to lead us astray.

Jesus reminds us, “My sheep listen to my voice.”

Are we willing to listen well to the shepherd’s voice?

..Many years ago, American school children learned to know the voice of Walter Damrosch.

He taught thousands of boys and girls to know and love music. Classes stopped at a certain hour, the school radio was switched on, and then his familiar voice was heard: “Good morning, my dear children.” They then enjoyed a half-hour of beautiful music, and he would tell them the meaning and the message within the music.

One day Mr. Damrosch was asked by the headmaster of a school to come and talk to the boys and girls. He sat on the platform and the children fidgeted, for he was an old man, and they knew that old men very often make long speeches. The headmaster let him introduce himself.

Mr. Damrosch stood up and smiled, but no one knew him. Then he said, “Good morning, my dear children,” and immediately the whole room was in an uproar. The children clapped and cheered.

Mr. Damrosch said, “And why do you cheer? You do not know me.”

“Yes we do,” the children replied. “We know your voice.”

--“And they shall hear my voice,” Wicket Gate Magazine, 6-5-02,

on Homiletics 5-2-04 “Jesus is Ovine Lingual”

Prior to caller ID and cell phones, when the telephone rang and you answered it, you never knew who was on the other end of the line. Would it be a telemarketer or a family friend?

Would it be good news or not so good news? If the person on the other end of the line was a telemarketer, then most of us would simply hang up. If the voice was familiar, however, often there was no need for introductions, for you knew who was on the other end of the line simply by knowing the sound of their voice.

This was often true of parents and children, siblings and close friends. When I heard voices that are familiar to me, even if they tried and fool me, I still knew who they were by the sound of their voice.

So it is with Jesus, our Good Shepherd. When we have lifted up our voices in prayer or cries of desperation, when we have lifted up our voices in praise and worship, Jesus knows our voice, and Jesus knows our name.

And just as we have learned the voices of our love ones and friends, we can also learn the sound of our Savior’s voice.

..God chose to speak to people in the Bible in some crazy ways. The Lord spoke through a burning bush, an audible voice from the sky, a talking donkey, written law, the prophets, and angels.

-Samantha Tidball “Listening to God’s Voice” 5-31-16 ministymatters.com

Jesus may not speak to us clearly in words the world may hear and understand, but Jesus speaks to us through the Holy Spirit whispering God’s truth to our hearts, speaking to us through Scripture, nature, music, silence, other people and more. The closer we grow in relationship with Jesus, the more we will learn to know the sound of our Lord’s voice. Then our challenge becomes, once we know the voice of Jesus, are we willing to listen to him and follow him?

.. We have no problem listening when the voice of the Shepherd is offering comfort and reassurance. F. Dean Leuking reminds of this when he says, “When it comes to speaking one sentence to someone hanging onto life by a thread in a hospital emergency room at 3 a.m., ‘I am the good shepherd ... who lays down his life for the sheep’ is unsurpassed. The Good Shepherd himself makes that word work. He did indeed lay down his life for the world, of his own accord, and has received power from his Father to take it again.” That, we can listen to.

But when the Shepherd calls us to follow him, sometimes through the valley of the shadow of death, or self-denial, or obedience, or self-sacrifice, or unconditional love — then the sheep don’t hear so well. We’re scared, and when we’re scared, like sheep, we do stupid things.

We take a wrong turn, we make ill-advised decisions, we become self-destructive.

-- Homiletics 5-2-04 “Jesus is Ovine Lingual”

Sometimes, even when we seek to follow Jesus, we must admit to selective hearing, listening to what we want to listen to and tuning out what we don’t want to hear.

We see this selective hearing in our Gospel passage today from John 10, when the religious leaders refused to listen to Jesus. During the Festival of Dedication, the commemoration of the victory over the Seleucids and the restoration of the Temple, the celebration we now call Hanukkah, Jesus was walking along the Portico of Solomon, a place where kings had long proclaimed God’s rule. There, in that place, the religious leaders surrounded Jesus, demanding a response to the question, “Are you the Messiah?”

They had seen Jesus’ miracles, they had heard Jesus’ teaching, yet still they did not believe.

They demanded an answer from Jesus, but wanted a specific answer, not the truth. They would only listen to what they wanted to hear, not what Jesus was really saying.

For their understanding of Messiah was contrary to Jesus’ understanding. They expected a warrior Messiah; Jesus came as a suffering Messiah. They expected someone to free them from Roman tyranny; Jesus came to free us all from sin.

Jesus indirectly answered them by saying, look at what I have done. My works testify to God in me. Look at what God is really doing in your midst, not what you wish God was doing.

Jesus challenged the religious leaders to look beyond their own narrow agendas to the truth of God’s kingdom being revealed on earth. Jesus still challenges us today to expand our understanding of God’s kingdom ways. Where do we see Jesus’ loving ways followed in our lives today?

Jesus challenged the religious leaders to see and believe, to learn and to listen. He then reiterated that his sheep will listen to his voice, and follow him. He once again affirmed the gift of eternal life, and the gift of his ongoing presence. These are gifts not offered only to his disciples long ago, but still offered to us willing to listen to him and live for him this day!

So as you go forth today to celebrate the special women in your life, listen not only to their wise words, but especially listen to the voice of Jesus. Listen as Jesus continues to claim you as one of God’s beloved flock. Listen as Jesus continues to remind you of God’s amazing grace guiding you throughout your life’s journey. Listen as Jesus continues to care for you, beside still waters and in the dark valleys of life. And listen as Jesus continues to call you to follow where he leads.

May we hone our listening skills this week, to strengthen our relationships with one another, and our relationship with Jesus. Jesus calls us, as a shepherd calls his sheep. May we listen, and learn, and follow.

Let us pray.