

Can You Hear Me Now?

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Seattle First Baptist Church

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Good Shepherd Sunday

John 10:22-30 and Psalm 23

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my God's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my God has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of God's hand. God and I are one.

Several years ago, there was a catchy if not annoying Verizon commercial on television. This young man appeared to travel to all parts of the country testing the reliability of his cell service. He kept moving from place to place saying, can you hear me now? Can you hear me now? The implication was, where ever he went the person on the other end of the call could hear him. When I read this text where Jesus said, my sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me, I thought of that commercial. Can you hear me now? The obvious answer of those who follow Jesus would be a resounding, YES! Yes, Jesus we hear you!

I admit, I don't know a whole lot about sheep. I spoke with Donna Ward this week trying to get insights on what sheep are really like. Many of you know, she raised sheep. I guess she could be called a shepherdess. There is this belief that sheep are dumb animals. From what I know about animal behavior, sheep don't appear to be dumb. In fact following the one who give you food and protects you seems pretty smart to me. Donna confirmed that sheep are not dumb. Usually there is a strong leader among the heard and if the shepherd or shepherdess can get the trust of the lead sheep, the rest of the heard will follow. A few other things I like about sheep are wool, cheese, and for you carnivores it is hard to beat a good braised lamb shank! Jesus used sheep as examples because sheep, and shepherds were well known to those around him.

If Jesus lived today in Seattle, he probably would have used parables about dogs instead of sheep. There are more dogs than children in Seattle and I know dogs. I have a special bond with Baxter our Black lab mix. Renee and I got Baxter from the shelter when he was 8 weeks old and 10 pounds. Now Baxter is 7 years old and somewhere around 90 pounds. Baxter is smart, has great hearing, a great nose, and is emotionally very sensitive.

When I call Baxter to come in the house, I know he hears me, but sometimes he chooses to ignore me. Either he is not ready to come in the house, or he is on the trail of a cat or rabbit and instinct compels him to chase it longer, or he thinks if he ignores me long enough, I will go get a treat to coax him in the house. Sheep may hear and always obey, but dogs don't. So, maybe we are more like our dogs than we would like to admit.

We may hear the voice of God coaxing us to step out of our comfort zone and risk going after the desires of our heart, but fear gets in the way and we pretend not to hear.

We may hear the voice of God say get off the couch. Put down the remote. Get rid of the soda, beer, and chips, and go get some exercise. Go to the gym or just walk around the block. But we refuse because the playoffs have started and so we pretend not to hear.

We may hear the voice of God say my people need shelter not just a tent under an overpass, education but not prison, a hand up and not a hand out. God speaks through the groaning of creation, aching for someone to care and be an advocate for endangered animals, old growth trees, and rivers that have no voice. Yet, we are often too busy to really hear or care.

When I was growing up, my older sister and I were quite different even though we were only 11 months apart in age. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago I always wanted to do the right thing. My sister Teresa was more rebellious and high-spirited than me. We grew up in a household where there was no talking back. The consequences for being disrespectful were severe. When our parents called for us, we were to respond immediately—not when we got ready. On occasion, when my mother called for us to stop playing and come to her, Teresa would say, pretend like you don't hear. WHAT? A couple of time I played the game, and soon I knew what the wrath of God felt like! I didn't like the consequences, so I responded immediately to my mother there after.

Our text says that those who know Jesus hear his voice and they follow him. So there appears to be two steps here if one professes to be a real follower of Jesus. First, we have to hear God's voice or recognize God's presence. Second, we have to follow God's call and do what God asks of us. Each week, Pastor Tim says, and today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts. I believe God speaks to us all the time. During our prayer time, while mowing the lawn, while in the company of dear friends, while taking a walk on the beach, while grilling burgers, while playing an instrument. God speaks all the time.

God may lead us to the most perfect fragrant rose and call out to us, can you hear me now? In the book *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Shug, the sophisticated juke joint singer is walking in a field of purple flowers with her lover Celie who is downtrodden and broken by years of physical abuse. While walking in this field of beauty Shug says, I think it really pisses God off to walk past the color purple and not notice it. I say amen to that! God gets tired of being ignored. God wants to know, can you hear me now?

Sometimes we have to slow down and be in a setting where we can hear. My favorite prophet in the Hebrew Bible is Elijah. There is a story in I Kings chapter 17 about how Elijah challenged the prophet of Baal to see whose God was the true God—the creator of the heavens and the earth. There was this great contest about whose sacrifice would be received by fire. There were 450 prophet of Baal on one side and only the prophet Elijah on the other.

Well nothing happened when the prophets of Baal put their sacrifice on the altar, but Elijah's sacrifice was taken up by fire proving YHWH was the true God. After Elijah won, he had all the other prophets put to death. After Elijah's great victory, he was terrified and afraid for his life. So he ran and hid in a cave on Mount Horeb. Elijah felt all alone and that he was the only one left who had not compromised his faith and bowed to Baal. So while having his pity party, Elijah waited for God to speak to him. There was a giant wind storm and Elijah knew God would speak to him in the wind, but there was no word from the Lord. Then there was a great earthquake and Elijah ran to the edge of the cave waiting for God to speak in the earthquake. But again, there was no word. Then there was a great fire on the

mountain. Elijah thought, surely, God would have a word of hope and comfort in the fire. So again Elijah ran to the edge of the cave waiting for a word, but there was no word.

But in the quiet aftermath of all that activity, God spoke to Elijah, in a still small voice or another translation says in sheer silence God spoke. You may not hear the divine word you are looking for in worship today, but perhaps during the drive home or while you are preparing dinner, or brushing your teeth tonight, you will hear the voice of God.

Then, we must follow that still small voice. Jesus said my sheep hear my voice and follow me. Where ever God sends you, God's grace will keep you. You may not have enough courage to stand on your own in the midst of adversity, but God said, my grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness.

When the pangs of grief feel overwhelming and the loss of a loved one is more than you can bear, listen for God's words of reassurance that weeping will endure for a night, but joy will come again. And, my favorite beatitude or blessings is one I found on a greeting card, blessed are those who mourn, for they have risked their hearts in loving.

And, when it feels that the whole world is against you, don't give up. Plow through and remember God said, no weapon formed against you shall prosper. And be as confident in God's protection as David when he wrote,

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your 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 shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

My sheep hear my voice and follow me. Can you hear me now?