

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Listening Life

John 10:1-10

During all my years of pastoral ministry, I've shepherded a flock through all kinds of situations, but nothing like this. In seminary, there were no classes on how to guide a congregation through a pandemic. There were lots of courses in biblical studies, church history, preaching, leading worship, counseling, Christian education, and church administration, but never a unit on how to minister locally when a virus is spreading globally. So like most other pastors and church leaders, I've spent the past two months learning as I go, in steady consultation with others who are also out front, trying to lead their sheep to places where there are resources for life.

There's certainly no shortage of resources for pastors and others involved in Christian ministry right now. Every day, my inbox receives a steady supply of notifications, invitations, and publications. A large percentage of them have to do with how to equip myself and the people of the congregation with the tools and practices we need to journey through this strange and threatening territory called COVID-19. One email was headlined: "Are you ready to adapt as a leader? Can mastering technology and context help us lead the way?" Another contact came in the form of a phone call offering me a tele-ministry system that would enable me to stay in touch with my congregation at a moment's notice to relay important information. As the sales representative put it, "You can call your membership in your own voice and text from 50 to 1,000 members in seconds in your own words from anywhere you are."

I was struck by how the sales representative emphasized being able to get a message to you, the congregation, in my own voice. The voice coming through your phone wouldn't be that of a stranger, reaching out to sell you something, to ask for your vote, to request your participation in a survey, or to remind you of an upcoming appointment. Rather, it would be my voice, the voice of your pastor, offering a word of information or inspiration to help you stay connected to God and his people during this time when the sheep are scattered. Though I didn't follow up on the sales call, I did at least appreciate the fact that they wanted to help me speak to you with my voice.

That's part of what makes this present moment of worship more personal and local. Right now, you're listening to a sermon from me, your pastor, in my voice. You can't see me like you normally would while I stand at the pulpit on Sunday morning. But you can still hear me. You recognize the voice. It's not the voice of a stranger. It's Pastor Kevin, the one you know, and who knows you.

I realize that I'm not the only preacher in your life. There are others whom you download or tune in to. Since it's Sunday morning, you may have already watched, or are planning to watch, your favorite TV preacher. I myself can't necessarily provide you with the same high quality production that you might get from someone's television ministry, but I can use our cyberspace connection to clear my throat, open my mouth, and trust that God can use my words, in my voice, to help you hear his voice in your life.

In our Scripture passage from John, Jesus talks about sheep who recognize the voice of their shepherd. In that day and time, a sheep pen was usually constructed adjoining the house and had a separate entrance gate. This gate or door provided the only access to the sheepfold. At night, an undershepherd might be assigned the task of watching the gate, in order to protect the flock. When the shepherd arrived to take the sheep out for grazing and watering, he would call them with a distinct sound, often a whistle, which the sheep would recognize and follow.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor talks about how a similar dynamic happens at the end of a day of grazing. She says:

Often [the] flocks will end up at the same watering hole around dusk, so that they get all mixed up together—eight or nine small flocks turning into a convention of thirsty sheep. Their shepherds do not worry about the mix-up, however. When it is time to go home, each one issues his or her own distinctive call—a special trill or whistle, or a particular tune on a particular reed pipe, and that shepherd’s sheep withdraw from the crowd to follow their shepherd home. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd’s voice, and it is the only one they will follow.¹

Later in John 10, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep” (vv. 14-15). Then he goes on to speak about how he has other sheep to bring into the fold who will also listen to his voice.

A good example of these other sheep appears in the chapter right before today’s text. In John 9, Jesus heals a man who was born blind. After Jesus restores the man’s sight, some of the religious leaders, who are supposed to be the shepherds of God’s people, don’t act very shepherdly, and expel the man from their community. These leaders seem more concerned about guarding their power and authority than about seeking the well-being of the people. They don’t believe that Jesus and his healing work come from God.

After the man has been kicked out of the synagogue, Jesus seeks him out and brings him into the community of his followers. So in addition to receiving physical sight, this man has been given spiritual sight as well. Even before he could see Jesus, the man had followed Jesus’ voice, and it led to new life. Now he belongs to Jesus’ flock. Now he’s under the care and guidance of the good shepherd.

To listen to Jesus and to follow Jesus is to belong to Jesus. For years, cattle rustling has been a major problem in Uganda. When the military or other authorities try to reunite cattle with their owners, one of the biggest difficulties lies in proving ownership. One article recounts how one elderly lady settled the issue:

The BBC’s Nathan Etungu witnessed the process beginning in a village north of Mbale. He told the BBC’s Network Africa that when an elderly woman stood before the herd a remarkable thing happened. She called her cows by name and to the amusement of the soldiers, as each cow heard her voice, it lifted its head and then followed her.

As far as the army was concerned, it was as strong a proof of ownership as one could find.²

Whether sheep or cows, the lesson is the same. Whom we follow, and to whom we belong, depends on to whom we’re listening.

Our lives are filled with all sorts of voices calling for our attention, adoration, and allegiance. Some of them are consistent with the will of God revealed in Christ, and some are not. This means that we need to be able to discern between the various claims to our attentiveness.

We need the help of the Holy Spirit to distinguish between which voices to heed and follow, and which ones to ignore. Spiritual director and teacher Ruth Haley Barton has written:

Discernment involves listening with love and attention to our experiences, to each other, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit deep within ourselves and others, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to pertinent facts and information, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions, to that place in us where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true.³

For Christians, truth is more than a set of propositions or a collection of teachings. Truth is a person, Jesus Christ. His life, death, and resurrection reveal God's way to us and show us the way to God. Jesus himself is the way. That's part of why, in today's text, Jesus describes himself as the gate. He's both the gate, the means of entering into the flock, the community of his people. And he's the shepherd, the one who calls and leads the flock out so that they can have what they need for life. Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (v. 10b).

So beloved sheep, as I speak to you again today, thank you for listening. Thank you for taking my words to heart and letting them work in you. I came across a story about three friends who went deer hunting together: a lawyer, a doctor, and a preacher. When a big buck appeared, the three of them shot simultaneously. Immediately the buck dropped to the ground, and all three rushed up to see how big it actually was. When they got to it, they couldn't determine whose shot actually killed the deer. As a heated debate ensued, a game officer came by and asked what the problem was. The doctor told him that they were debating who shot the buck. The officer took a look at the deer and within a few seconds, he said with confidence, "The preacher shot the buck!" They all wondered how he knew that so quickly. The officer said, "Easy. The bullet went in one ear and out the other."

I suppose that story pokes fun at both preachers and those who listen to them. It reminds me not to take lightly the awesome responsibility of bringing the word of Christ to you each week. And at the same time, it reminds you not to just hear the word of Christ and be done with it, but rather to let the word of Christ enter you and dwell in you and change you as you put it into practice.

How well you and I are listening to Jesus will be revealed in how well we're actually following Jesus in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. I realize that our present circumstances are far from ordinary. But the good news is that at all times, including a pandemic, Jesus is speaking. Like a thief in the night, COVID-19 may have come and stolen many of the things that we were accustomed to. But the coronavirus can't silence Jesus, or keep us from turning our ears toward him. In fact, there may be things about our current situation that have given you an opportunity to step back and be more attentive to the voice of Jesus in your life. Perhaps because of the coronavirus situation, other voices whose claims upon your life seemed so pressing and urgent have now receded, and you're more attuned to how the Lord is speaking into your life about the things that matter most.

Beloved flock, I speak to you today with my voice, as your shepherd. But most of all, I want this sermon, and every sermon, to be a means through which you hear the good shepherd, the one who gave his life for you. That speaks more loudly than anything about who he is, who you are to him, and the fullness of life that you can experience by listening to him, following him, and letting him lead you in his way.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1993) n.p.

² "Ugandan Cows Know Their Names." BBC website. February 25, 2003.

³ Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008) n.p.