FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*The Voice* John 10:1-10

Last week, in the passage we heard from the Gospel of Luke, the two disciples in the story did *not* recognize the Risen Christ when he met them on the road to Emmaus. They did not recognize his voice or his face. They were so caught-up in the mystery of the empty tomb that they could not see beyond their own confusion, disappointment, and wonder.

This morning’s passage is from the Gospel of John who tells us of how important it is to be able to distinguish the voice of the Lord from any other voice we may hear. Indeed, in this passage, Jesus himself talks about how important it is for us to hear and know his voice. He likens it to a herd of sheep being able to discern their shepherd’s voice from that of a stranger. They follow the voice they know, the voice of goodness. They follow the voice that comes from the One who protects them and treats them with kindness.

One writer described how even now, unlike shepherds in other lands, middle eastern shepherds walk in front of their sheep, occasionally turning around to call out to them and to look and make sure that all is well with them. This is different from shepherds who herd their sheep from behind. Sheep in the Middle East *follow* their shepherds. They are *led* forward instead of prodded forward. They listen for, and follow only, their shepherd’s voice.

What Jesus wants his disciples to remember is that sheep who can correctly identify their shepherd’s voice will be the ones who will be kept safely away from predators. They will be the ones who will be led into meadows of abundant grass and cool, sweet water. They will have their wounds tended to and their illnesses treated. In other words, the sheep who follow only their master’s voice will be the ones who will not be troubled by trials and dangers like the foolish sheep who tag-along after a stranger who does *not* care about their well-being.

Anyway, that is what sheep do. And as far as metaphors go, that is about as far as we can go with this one.

While we can go along with the notion that the life of both human beings and sheep will be much better if both species of beings are able to tell whom they are following—the shepherd or someone else—we cannot say that human beings will have exactly the same outcome as the sheep. The sheep will be protected from death and all dangers if they get it right. We cannot make the same claim for human beings.

For us, there are some dangers from which following the Good Shepherd cannot and will not shield us. There are some who *will* follow the voice of love and still it will not keep them safe from persecution, danger, even death. We know this is true because history is filled with people who have suffered tremendously; some—too many—have died painfully, sadly.

We call such people heroes. We honor them best when we acknowledge and celebrate that these people correctly identified and followed exclusively the voice of the one true shepherd. And it is also important that we remember them truthfully and without fictionalizing, and so it must be admitted that the way of even those who are faithful to the voice of God are not guaranteed freedom from suffering or even mortal death.

Yet, Jesus himself tells us that it is critical that we listen and follow—to the exclusion of all other voices—the singular voice that is the Good Shepherd. He tells us that *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.* [And that he] *came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* [v.10]

Over and against the many heroes we have known who have suffered and died, how might we understand and embrace Jesus’ exhortation, his urgent appeal that we continue to listen for and follow only the voice of our one true shepherd?

I say again: history is filled with the stories of people who did. Most of us can rattle off a dozen or so names at the drop of the hat of people just like this. We offer names like: Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandella who rightly believed they heard, in their respective countries, the voice of love calling them to march, to lift their voices, and to gather others to declare the evil of racism.

We can also add Dietrich Bonhoffer to the list—who heard the voice of Christ calling him out of safety in New York (where he was living and teaching) and back into Germany where he was eventually arrested and was executed for participating in the resistance movement against Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich.

More currently, we can add Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan, the young woman who gained global attention when she survived an assassination attempt at age 15 for advocating for education for girls.

Add to your list every GLBTQ+ person who lives their truth openly, often in the face of continued prejudice, danger, and hatred.

Add to your list the long line of women who have endured indignity, danger, infantilization, and objectification as they fought for everything from the right to vote to the right to equal pay for equal work, to reproductive rights—the right to exercise complete authority over our own bodies without government intervention.

From the likes of antislavery and women’s rights activist, Lucy Stone in the 1800’s, to Greta Thunberg who is fighting the good fight for all of us regarding earth care, and for the generations who will inherit the earth we leave behind for them.

I would also like to mention Waris Dirie who at the age of 13, ran away from her family in Somalia near the Ethiopian border rather than submit to marriage to a much older man. Through sheer grit and determination, she got herself all the way to London where she began to make a life for herself. When she was 18, she was spotted by a talent agent who helped her become a super model during the later 1980’s. You may also remember her as one of the “Bond Girls.”

I mention her (as do many others) because she became an advocate for women like herself who defy custom and culture to free themselves from practices that are oppressive and even unhealthy for women. In Dirie’s case, it was Female Genital Mutilation or FGM—a practice common to the community Dirie came from.

Despite the taboo in just about every culture of openly talking about it, during the 1990s, Dirie came forward and did talk about it. She used her platform, as a famous person, a supermodel, to speak out against FGM and she has helped build clinics to help young women who have been subjected to it.

What you, no doubt, have noticed about every individual I have mentioned is that they could not and did not let the pressures of the people and the culture around them dictate how they would live their lives. They heard the voice of love calling them to a different way, a better way where people—all people—are treated with dignity, compassion, and a sense of justice.

Each of them looked around and asked if the people and the community in which they were living truly honored each individual in that community. Did it provide a place of safety and protection for all? Did it make room for differences? Did it allow all people to live with freedom from coercion and harm. If the answer was “no,” each of them sought out the voice that did speak of these things. Each in their own time and community found the voice of the Good Shepherd, and they followed it—no matter where it took them, no matter what the danger.

As I said earlier, we call these people heroes. Sometimes we call them saints. The thing is, they are people who persisted when they found themselves surrounded by too many voices offering so much less than what God offers us. As our Good Shepherd, God calls us to ways of freedom, justice and love. And although I have lifted-up people who are famous, I would like to read you what one writer has said about such people, not the famous ones but all of us. He wrote this:

*God’s heroes are going to be found right here, if they are going to be found anywhere at all. Found among men and women who respond to the call of Christ. Found among ordinary people willing to take risks and do extraordinary work. Found among folks able to proclaim the kingdom of heaven and extend God's love and compassion to others. Found among people who depend more on divine authority than on human ability, and who rejoice more in God’s acceptance than in worldly recognition.*

We probably know a few of these people. If we look around the room, we can probably identify many of those people.

Friends, let us continue looking around. Let us continue listening with all of our hearts to the voice of God. And most of all, Let us depend more on God’s authority and genuine caring for us, all of us. Let us listen for God’s voice and let us follow it to a life of goodness and love. Let this be so. Amen.