

**Sermon May 3, 2020, John 10.1-10**

**New Song Episcopal Church**

**The Rev. Mel Schlachter**

The dominant “east” window above the altar at Trinity Church downtown is called the Good Shepherd window, for the presence of Jesus and a lamb held in his arm with another sheep nearby and a sheepdog at his side. Actually, it should be called the “Lost Sheep” window because it picks up Jesus’ parable about searching for the one sheep out of the 99 that was lost. But hey, that’s what a Good Shepherd does anyway. Makes it yet more inspirational.

The window is not original to the church. It was added in the 1920’s or so replacing non-pictorial decorated glass. Generations have found it uplifting and comforting. When the architect for our 2006 renovation proposed that we move that window upstairs to the chapel and restore the east window as it was originally, how great was the hue and cry. It stayed.

And while the former rector is getting exegetically correct, the window depicts a British Jesus, not a Middle Eastern one. It’s not just the pale skin, it’s the sheepdog. And that brings us to our Gospel. All that business about the sheep “hear my voice” is a very practical part of Palestinian sheep herding. It is striking to have a flock of sheep go past you on the road with the shepherd either in front or behind, when all of a sudden they make a 90 degree turn down another road. How did that happen? Well, they heard the shepherd’s voice command. No canine nipping hocks, it’s the voice. I’ve seen some flocks make their way through pretty thick town traffic on a small road, very calm and guided by a calm voice. “They follow him because they know his voice.”

So it is all about hearing, and hearing not only with one’s ears but also with the heart. Whose voice do you hear? Whose do you follow? Or do you hear conflicting voices, or even a cacophony? Psalm 36 diagnoses our human tendency to get our loyalties very wrong: **“Evil, like a voice, whispers deep within the human breast, and blinds the inner eye from the awesome sight of God. It veils the heart in images of flattery and words in hopes its hateful, ugly nature will be disguised. The words it speaks are self-deceiving ones, that block the good that could be done for all.”**

We have heard a voice, all right, but it is my own pretending it is more. How destructive that kind of voice is for a flock of any kind.

“Discernment” is the name given to the cultivation of good ears in the heart, ears that recognize one voice among others, including the voice of self-deception. The fourth century

fathers and mothers in the Middle Eastern deserts knew that the further along you were in religious knowledge and practice, the trickier the self-deception can be. But I would guess that many of you who hear my voice today have heard Jesus or the Spirit speak to you intimately in your heart and soul. You have heard voices that were not psychosis, but actually bubbling up from a very deep well through your being. How do we know it is Jesus? That is the main question for the disciples at Easter.

A few weeks ago we saw Mary Magdalene stunned, coming away from an empty tomb, looking for the body of her much-loved teacher. Stumbling into the gardener she asks where did you put him? The risen Good Shepherd speaks only her name, and she knows the voice so well. “Mary”—that it can’t be the gardener at all.

So our Savior’s voice that we hear goes to our deepest self. It also does not induce guilt (a great way to tell the difference) but awe, wonder, love and freedom. Jesus doesn’t necessarily give us marching orders either; he accepts us for who we really are, and we know we are loved.

A long time ago just after seminary years I was part of a very stimulating Bible study, two hours once a week. It was during my major “challenge authority everywhere” period. Having some quiet time in one night’s session and in a turmoil about a Gospel passage, I heard a voice as if it was sitting next to me. “Mel, why do we struggle with me so?” I knew right away who it was. Jesus, , one of the authorities I had in my head. I was blown away. After some time I knew I no longer needed to wrestle. Since then Christ Jesus has been among other things, a brother working together in this world for God’s kingdom. After such an encounter we usually don’t need to be told what to do or where to go--we have had the clues all along.

When have you heard a voice that you recognized the first time, a voice that loved you and gave you all the strength you needed for what lay ahead? From inside? From someone else’s lips? Somebody remarked that the gate of the parable swings both ways—inwards, for the flock to come inside the fold and have a secure night; and outward, for the shepherd to let them out into the world beyond, perhaps lead them to a new pasture. The Eucharistic prayer admonishes us “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.”

This fourth week of Easter, work on your hearing. Not with your outward ears necessarily, but the ears of your heart. Listen for the unmistakable voice which draws you to God.