

The Good Shepherd  
John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17

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This morning, as a mini protest of the alarms snatching me out of sleep mode before the sun, I decided to keep my eyes shut and just listen. The first thing I heard after my hand stumbled to turn off the sweet offending sounds of my alarm were the chorus of birds at varying distances outside my window. Their voices were singing different kinds of songs, I'm sure communicating a variety of things, all of them coded and foreign to my untrained ears; all of them together making such beautiful music, nonetheless.

I listened some more and I could hear another critter marking out the beat to accompany the birds' songs. Because I'm not an expert on these things, I couldn't identify the source of the beat-maker but its contribution to the early-morning chorus was a noticeable and beautiful one. I heard a single car drive over the bricked street, headed who-knows-where at such an early hour. As I heard it make its way down the street, I wondered about the stories of its occupants. Before I could begin to construct a fictional narrative, I heard a distant plane in the sky carrying who-knows-how-many passengers from one location to another, all bearing even more stories I'll never know. Before I got too caught up in that rabbit hole of manufacturing their stories, I became aware of the steady hum of the appliances in my kitchen. They stand there on duty all day and through every night, keeping my foods cold and fresh.

It was surprising to discover just how loud a quiet morning can be. Most times, my mornings are drowned out by the sounds of my grumbling that it's too early to be up or rushing about scrambling because I snoozed one time too many. The rest of my day isn't any quieter as I move from one obligation to another, keeping my mind moving too quickly to be still enough to just listen. So even though I was being sluggish in my start this morning, it was a real gift to just be silent and truly listen.

This is especially an important thing to realize as we explore our gospel reading this morning. I think it was last year around this time with y'all that I discovered the importance of the shepherd's voice in their ability to care for and guide their sheep. Unlike other situations where one who leads does so from the front, a shepherd is best able to guide the sheep safely and away from danger from the back of the flock. The only way that's possible is by the use of their voice. The sheep come to know the shepherd's voice and are safest when they're able to hear it *and respond* accordingly.

It's easy to imagine how noisy a flock of sheep would be, and even that noise is in addition to any other producers of noise in their environment. It's no surprise that sometimes sheep can miss hearing their shepherd's voice with the competing noises around them and end up wandering off into sticky situations. I can relate to the easiness of losing track of the one thing that sets us on the path of safety and right relationship. I'm sure I'm not the only one either, but I won't have you reveal yourselves.

I love hearing this gospel reading coupled with our reading from Revelation because it continues to challenge the ways in which we're conditioned to hear and see those around us. In John's vision, we learn that "there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." The divisions we cling to on this earth don't carry over into the great hereafter. Our nationalities, our languages, our tribes, our *whatevers* will get to join together without the divisiveness that these differences create here on earth.

There'll be a great multitude, one that cannot be counted! People from all over the world will be present. People who speak every kind of language will be there, whether German, Sotho, or even some good ol' homegrown southern English with a twang. Those who may not've believed in the way that we believe will be there. Those who are scraggly and impoverished and homeless will be there. I'm grateful to be without the heavy burden of having to decide who all will be there and how it is they get there.

With all the somewhat arbitrary divisions in our world – race, gender, age, religion, nationality, and so on – I find great hope and promise in these words. These brief sentences break all those divisions right open. In ways we may never understand, our Good Shepherd creates room in every flock for each of us. And all of our separate flocks as we see them all truly belong to the one flock of our Good Shepherd. I don't know about you, but I'm extremely grateful for that promise, because there're so many ways in which I'd be flockless without it. Am I the only one in this room who finds goodness in the fact that there're many flocks in other folds? I certainly hope not. I can't think of anyone who doesn't want to have a sense of fully being who they are and being fully accepted as a valued member of any given flock. *And* to have the added protection of and care from a loving shepherd just sweetens the deal.

In a world so divided and filled with the noise of fearing the other, there's hope in John's vision because "these are they who have come out of the great ordeal." We realize that these people aren't only the ones whose lives have been led blamelessly and with praiseworthy stories. These people are also the ones who've had to make their ways through great ordeals, some of which we may never fully understand. They're also those whose lives were ordinary and whose stories may even have disappeared if not for the few who continue to share them.

The good news for the people in John's community is the good news for us here today. Back then, the original audience of this text was a people who were faced with one tragedy after another, anxiously awaiting the return of Jesus, who would bring about a new world order. That's not very different than where we find ourselves today, as one headline after the next highlights the dire situations in our lives today. *We need* to hear this text as one bad thing after another falls into our lives personally. We, too, anxiously await a new world order.

These words in Revelation are comforting and hopeful. They're comforting in our remembrances of loved ones who've previously died, knowing that they've already made their way through the greatest ordeals in their lives. These words are comforting in our current struggles of every kind, knowing that

we also are making our way through great ordeals in our lives. We can do this! The greatest comfort of all is that we don't have to do it alone. We have each other as we journey side-by-side through the many ordeals we face. We have other sheep in the fold who've gone through the very challenges we continue to face. They testify to God's ability to get us through our hardships.

When I hear these beautiful promises of God in Revelation, I can't help but stop and feel the comfort and hope found in these words: "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and (my favorite part) God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The pain of the many different kinds of loss we experience in life is real. The pain of being in the midst of our great ordeals is real. God can and will wipe away every tear from their eyes; from *our* eyes. There's great comfort and hope, both in the surprising scope of those gathered in the heavens and in the depth of God's careful wiping of our suffering and tears.

And so I ask, in the midst of all of this, can we still hear the voice of our Good Shepherd? Are we still enough to hear our Shepherd communicate with us? Are we rushing from one good deed to another, being in constant motion enough that we completely miss the voice leading us from danger to safety? Are we able to hear God's guiding voice? If so, what is that voice telling us? If we can't hear the voice, why might that be?

I don't have answers to any of these questions. I only raise them up because I have a strong belief that we're *all* being challenged, in different ways, to consider not just who's in our flock but also to learn how to listen more fully to the steady voice of the Good Shepherd. It's easy to miss among the noise of all the sheep around us. It's easy to miss as we go about the constant busy-ness of the world in which we live.

I realize I asked some big questions and provided few ways of answering them. I'm okay with that. But as we leave today, I pray that all of us can leave with a renewed sense of being a part of something greater than we can ever imagine. I pray that we can leave with a sense of peace in the fact that we're not alone in

our struggles, no matter what they may be. I pray that we can leave with a stronger hope in the promises we've heard here today. Like sheep, we're under the watchful care of our ever-present, ever-loving Good Shepherd. Let's be still enough to hear that protective voice. And then let's be courageous enough to respond accordingly.

Amen.