Don’t You Recognize My Voice?

David Nelson

A Confession

Let me begin with a confession. I love the 23rd psalm but I find it extremely difficult to identify with sheep. There’s no doubt in my mind that this stems in part from having grown up in a 20th century city on the east coast of the United States where my exposure to sheep was, to say the least, limited. I was, however, exposed to the American Western where “Them goldang sheep is ruinin’ the grazing. And that bloody squatter has started fencin’ off range.” And every boy in the theater knew that that sheepherder, who was somehow less macho than the cowboys, would be lucky to make it to the last reel. And then only because of his unexpected friendship with the mean looking gunfighter with the heart of gold who reckoned there was land enough for everybody and the sheep farmers were getting a raw deal. And let’s face it. Sheep are just not a natural vehicle for conveying the myth of rugged American individualism. Even our language conspires against sheep. If you’ve done something really stupid and you are really embarrassed that you’ve done it, you’re described as looking sheepish. If you haven’t had enough sleep and you’re not thinking well, we say that you’re wooly minded. And if you were unfortunate enough to be on the wrong end of a sub-prime mortgage arrangement engineered by a less than scrupulous broker someone is likely to say that you were fleeced. And then there’s church sheep art. Let’s just say that, as far as I’m concerned, if you’ve got sheep art you don’t need sugar at coffee hour.

Now, given this background, it makes perfect sense that, back in February, in response to Devin’s invitation to preach on a Sunday

during Lent or Easter, I would send Devin an email that read, “I think that Easter 4 would be a good one for me to tackle.” Go figure.

The first story

"Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good—a sheep stealer! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it." And all God’s people said….

Their Reaction

Well, actually what they said was, ‘Would you mind running that by us again?’ But why? Some of them have been listening to him for almost three years. Most of them would certainly remember at least one story from that collection of rabbinically obtuse tales we call parables. They were part of his teaching – his way of getting people to look at something in a new way by telling them a story. As they go, this one doesn’t seem to be terribly obscure. It isn’t even really a story. It’s an observation of facts that his listeners, who did not grow up in a 20th century American city, would be thoroughly familiar with. Sheep pens that were located near villages were relatively large, shared by the community, kept under lock and key, and closely guarded. The guard at the gate recognizes the shepherd and admits

him. And then the shepherd literally calls his sheep out of the pen. The sheep are imprinted on his voice. They trust him. They will follow him. They will stay with him. And that’s it. End of story. Well, so far so good. But his listeners are waiting for the punch line and it never comes. You can almost hear them saying, “Ok, we’ve got the picture. And just what was it that you wanted us to pay attention to?”

The context

On the face of it, it seems like a legitimate question. But if you take a look at the context you begin to get the feeling that they really hadn’t been paying attention. So what’s the context? Well the context, at least as seen by me, about two thousand years later, is one you’ll recognize. We read it just six weeks ago. Jesus is in Jerusalem during the celebration of Hanukkah and encounters the man who was blind from birth. Jesus puts mud on his eyes and sends him to the pool of Siloam to wash. And there, for the first time in his life, that man finds out what it’s like to see. This causes all sorts of confusion and controversy that we don’t need to revisit but we do want to pay attention to how that story ends. You’ll remember that the Pharisees call this man in to tell them what happened to him. And then they toss the poor guy out on the street because he pointed out to them that they kept asking him the same questions because they didn’t like his answers. And at this point let’s pick up the text.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

The man said, "Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him."

Jesus said, "You're looking right at him. Don't you recognize my voice?"

"Master, I believe," the man said, and worshiped him.

Don’t you recognize my voice? And suddenly it all falls into place. “Master, I believe.” The sheep know the voice of the shepherd.

But no one who’s listening is connecting that conversation with the story that follows it. Now in fairness there’s no way for us to know how much time has elapsed between the two but it seems as though Jesus expected them to make the connection. John says, they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep.”

When I first read that I was a little frustrated. It seemed to me that he’s totally changed the metaphor. But it turns out that he hasn’t. When his flock was in a pasture some distance from town, it was common for a shepherd to make an impromptu sheepcote. Find a convenient cave; put the sheep in; pull the gate across. Except that there probably wasn’t anything that you could use to make a gate. So the shepherd would lie down across the mouth of the cave and his body became the gate. It’s a wonderful image of God’s care. And for the last few nights I’ve been trying to hold it in front of me as I’ve gone to sleep.

Now listen to how he deepens it. ‘Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture….I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.’

Then he goes on to say, ‘I am the good Shepherd.’ It’s one of those self-descriptions that are unique to John’s gospel. ‘I am the bread of life.’ ‘I am the light of the world.’ ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’ ‘I am the true vine.’ ‘I am the gate.’ ‘I am the good shepherd.’ What does he mean, ‘I am the good shepherd’? In English ‘good’ is one of those prolific adjectives that we use all the time. And it has many meanings, most of which have survived being mangled by ad agencies. Webster’s New College Dictionary offers us sixteen different definitions, the first of which is ‘having desirable or positive qualities’. But the Greek word that John uses here is καλον. Its first meaning is beautiful. When I saw that it stopped me in my tracks. And so did the variations that followed. Listen to them: handsome, excellent, eminent, choice, surpassing, precious, useful, suitable, commendable, admirable; beautiful to look at, shapely, magnificent; excellent in its nature and characteristics, and therefore well adapted to its ends; genuine, approved, competent, able, such as one ought to be, praiseworthy, noble, beautiful by reason of purity of heart and life, and hence praiseworthy; morally good, noble, honorable, conferring honor, affecting the mind agreeably, comforting and confirming.

And this is the one who knows us, who calls us by name, and who said, ‘I came so that they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.’ The one who asks us, ‘Don't you recognize my voice?’