

Fourth Sunday of Easter May 8 2022

John 10:22-30, Acts 9:36-43

Stetson Steven joined the Body of Christ this past Wednesday. Surrounded by his family and members of this assembly he entered into the waters of baptism and came out of them a new creation. Child of God. Sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. One of the sheep who belongs to Christ.

When I speak with parents who are seeking to have their child baptized, I find myself asking about a favorite sports team in the household. The Packers or the Cubs are often mentioned. I ask if they have already purchased their child a onesie or decorated their room with the logos of the team. If they watch games together and talk to their child about the pitcher, or a particular play, or of games past, even though their child may be non-verbal right now. If, as they grow, they share stories with them about their own upbringing to love this team.

Whether it is a sports team, or gardening, or reading, or woodworking, or cars, or crafting, I think we can all relate to this experience. Of being raised with a parent or other loved one sharing a passion with us. Of raising our own children and passing along those same passions. Now, especially when we are young, there are not formal lectures. Thirty minutes once a week where you sit down and talk about this. Rather, it is woven into the fabric of your lives. It might wax and wane according to the season, but it is always present, a voice you might say, that is always there. And that voice becomes familiar, and shapes you and your children and your children's children. If not for that team, at least for that sport, or hobby, or activity.

It's been studied that child learn the voice of their mothers and their partner even while they are in the womb. That's why they encourage parents to talk with their child even in utero. It builds the bond between them. And as after they are born parents begin to know the child's voice, what cry is the "I'm hungry" and which is the "I need to be changed". They can pick out their squeal of laughter through all the others in a gaggle of children. And vice versa. I still remember, during my college years, being in a production of *Sweet Charity* working at a summer theatre and forgetting my parents were coming that night until I was onstage and heard my mother's laugh through all the hundreds of others in the room. House left in the back.

The Judeans want Jesus to tell them plainly if he is the Messiah. Jesus' somewhat frustrated response is, "I have told you, and you didn't believe it. What I do, my actions of healing, comforting, reaching out to the marginalized, all testify to who I am." What I do and who I am correspond to each other. You don't believe because you are not in my flock.

See, my flock, Jesus says, hear my voice, I have personal experience of them, they follow after me. They are around me and I am around them and we get to know each other. Over time, my voice becomes familiar to them, enough to pick it out in the midst of the cacophony of other voices in the world today. I know them, their foibles and faults, their gifts and joys. Because we hang with each other, we're around each other a lot of the time.

This is the reality of faith. That most of our stories of belief are not spectacular, like the resurrection of Tabitha. Rather most of us believe because we become familiar with the voice of the Shepherd over time – through family, friends, through coming to worship and hearing and reading scripture. It makes for a pretty boring story, but it is life, isn't it? Years

spent in proximity together, getting to know one another, our foibles and voices. Praying the Lord's Prayer, speaking the Apostles' Creed, singing the hymns and songs of faith, hearing the stories of Jesus, Ruth, Abraham, Mary, David, Esther. The stories of Mom, Grandpa, Dad, Aunts and Uncles.

The Lord is my shepherd and I follow his voice because I have been around it since before I was born. Even in my mother's womb I heard the hymns, the prayers, the preaching. As a child, I read the stories of faith regularly because a story Bible was prominent in my library. I heard them at home and in worship. I sang the songs of faith, heard the words from the pulpit, and even in confirmation, when I was in the back of the church with my friend Bryant playing paper football, I still heard the voice of the Shepherd. And something sank deep into my being. So I can recognize that voice.

Jesus says in John 14, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." I think he is talking about his voice. As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we talk about the power of the Holy Spirit to act in and through the Word of God (proclaimed, read, sung) to transform lives. This voice is the only one that can save us. It is the only voice that calls us on the Way to follow Jesus. That leads us to the Truth of things. That give us life fuller and more abundant.

But we get distracted by other voices, don't we? Mostly because we hang out with them too much (or maybe it is we spend too little time with Jesus?). The voices of this world lie to us. They tell us that we are different from each other not in the wonderful diversity of God's creation, but in value. That some are worth more than others. The voices of this world divide us, make us fear one another. The voices of this world lead us into temptation

and move us into the wilderness. They say listen to us and all will be well-voices of money, power, of politics and popular.

The voices of this world can also sound like our own voice. Ones that say we are not worthy, or it's our fault, or we're not good enough.

These voices are doing to us what they did for the Judeans. Seeking to drown out the voice of Christ. To make us believe that they are the ones that will save us. That will give us a better life. But they are all just deceiving us.

Our hope lies in the promise of Jesus, that once we have been claimed, nothing can snatch us away. That in our claiming and naming in baptism we are made a child of God and sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked with the cross of Christ forever. An indelible mark. But one which we need to be reminded of. A voice that is always calling us, but sometimes one we need to get familiar with again.

A professor of mine once defined Lutheran spirituality as placing ourselves in a position to hear the Word and share in the sacraments. In essence, to place ourselves in a position to hear the voice of Jesus. To regularly read or listen to the Word of God in Scripture. To hear it proclaimed and discussed by the faithful in sermons and study. To sing it and speak it in hymns and songs and liturgy.

But also, to be alongside those who have this voice of Jesus so ingrained in their lives they speak it in the same way. Have you ever known someone like that? Who sounds just like their parent? I've been told that my own cadence and sayings are a lot like my dad.

This is what happened with Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, whose name in both the Hebrew and Greek is translated as Gazelle. She was one of the many women of means who served God in the early church. Most of them are nameless, faceless, but they get their due in Dorcas. This disciple of Jesus followed after him by caring for the poor and helpless in her town, especially the widows. We are told she was continually giving alms, doing acts of charity for others. For the widows we hear that she made sure they were clothed. But it must have been more than that, don't you think? That for them and the other disciples in Joppa to mourn her passing so much they sent for Peter, that this woman named Gazelle must have been an embodiment of the voice of Jesus. Doing what he did, yes. But also, being friend, confidant, healer to them all. 'Speaking' to them in the same way Jesus did. Bringing them the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. A life fuller and more abundant than the Roman Empire could provide.

I don't think there were many who believed in the Lord that day because of the spectacular resurrection Peter was able to perform, but because of the constant everyday love of God in Jesus Christ that Dorcas showed. Because of the love her fellow believers had for her. They heard the voice of Jesus in the life of Dorcas, and found their salvation in it.

Friends, we are surrounded by the noise of so many voices that call us to that which I am convinced is evil. Or at least to our detriment. Voices outside and in. Many of which sound so reasonable.

Listen my friends to the voice of the one who loves you, without condition. Listen to the one whose Father knit you in your mother's womb. Who knows every hair on your head. Place yourself constantly in a place where you can hear that voice spoken, read it, sing it. Do this, and you will find peace and

grace beyond all others. Do this, and you will find the life you desire. Do this and you will know the voice of the Shepherd, to follow him in right paths, to still waters, and green pastures. To a table overflowing even when you are in the midst of your enemies.

Come and hear the voice of Jesus calling you beloved and leading you into life.

Thanks be to God.