

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

John 10:1-10

10 "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Sermon: Listening for the voice

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

I am the good shepherd, says Jesus. I enter in through the gates, the gatekeeper opens the gate for Jesus, because the shepherd has authority. The shepherd owns the sheep. He calls the sheep by name. Jesus knows each one of his own – intimately.

Have you ever looked at a flock of sheep? They pretty much all look the same – at least they do to me. If I had one sheep I would name it, maybe even if I had two, but with a flock of them? I can't imagine that I would bother to name them, and if I did I doubt I would be able to match the correct name to the correct animal.

Before I came to St Paul's I was a student minister at a small rural church near St Thomas – St James it was called. Many of the families there were farmers, so pastoral visits usually exposed me to new experiences, as I grew up in a world of concrete and asphalt.

On one particular visit I helped a friend of mine milking cows. It was quite the experience – if you've never spent much time around cows, let me tell you that when you get up close to them, they are big. Really big – unnervingly big.

In the milking parlour we were below the cows somewhat, in a sort of pit so that we didn't have to bend to milk them, and that placed their hooves uncomfortably close to my face. Each time I would touch them they would lift their leg. Not a kick, more just stepping, but they were nervous and they made me nervous as well as I was in a vulnerable spot and they were quite strong. After a little while I figured out that if I put a hand on their leg and talked to them as I came up beside them they were calm and didn't step, and I started to feel more comfortable.

The cows were hesitant to come into the milking stalls when I was there, since they didn't know me. I was a stranger to them. The cows didn't know me and I didn't know them. But I noticed something else that struck me. Brad knew them. He knew them all. He knew which ones were more difficult and ornery – the kickers - and he took those ones himself. He knew the ones that were older and didn't give as much milk, he knew the ones who had under-formed teats and only milked the three good ones. He knew the one who had an infection, she still needed to be milked, but he milked her into a different bucket so as not to contaminate rest of the batch. Brad knew the cows, and they knew him. They didn't have names, but he certainly knew each animal.

Jesus knows us, he knows our needs. What is good for you may not be good for me, and the same is true the other way around. At a meeting last week I was reminded of the period during which Kyoungsoo and I first came to faith. Jesus treated us very differently.

Kyoungsoo was newly out of school, living in a foreign country, married to a man who she hadn't really known for all that long. She needed security – she needed a safe foundation from which to learn about God. God gave her a good stable job at UWO, where she remained for 13 years, until we moved to Simcoe.

For myself – I was a computer programmer, full of myself and my skills – I thought I had the world all figured out and had placed my confidence in myself. So God took away my job. I spent a couple of years bouncing from contract to contract – earning money, then nothing for a while, working again, out of work. This lack of control forced me to learn to be humble, I learned that I couldn't rely on my own strengths, but had to rely on God.

So – two people, two different needs. Kyoungsoo needed stability so she could learn to trust God, and that's what she got. I needed a kick in the pants and to have my ego punctured to learn to rely on God, and that's what I got. That's what it means that the shepherd knows his sheep – the same thing doesn't work for each person. Parents understand this – we have to parent our children in different ways to

match their temperament and abilities – even twins are not the same. The good shepherd knows this too.

That the shepherd knows each of us is pretty plain, and we really wouldn't expect any less. After all, the shepherd our inward parts, and knit us together in our mother's womb. Of course God knows us – that naturally follows from being omniscient and omnipresent.

It's the second part of what Jesus says that should give us pause. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. Is that true? Do we know his voice? Do you know Jesus' voice?

This, it turns out, is not so easy. But it can be learned in exactly the same way that we learn most things – we try, and then we learn from our mistakes and our successes. We hear a voice, and see what happens when we respond. We don't test the tone or timber of the voice, but we learn to identify the spirit behind the voice.

Test the spirits, we read in 1 John, to see if they are from God. The next question course is 'how do we test them?' to which I would reply with the words of Jesus: 'by their fruit you shall know them.' We identify the spirit by seeing where it leads us. We will learn to recognize the voice of Jesus only when we follow.

I can't remember if I've told you this story before – if I have please bear with me. This took place last year around this time when my second son was stationed up in Meaford. He had about 36 hours of furlough, and I wanted to bring him home for the weekend, so I spent a lot of time that weekend driving.

On the way up, as I was driving I noticed something at the side of the road – it kind of looked like a purse – something leather about this big laying in the gravel as I zoomed by. I didn't think much of it, but as I continued to drive I kept thinking that I needed to go back. The further I drove the more I felt that driving past that object was a mistake. I was headed for Meaford – going in the right direction, and yet I knew I was not on the right track.

As the feeling grew over the next few miles I knew that I would not have any peace until I turned around, so back I went. I found it again, pulled over and as I picked it up by the weight of it I knew exactly what it was. It was a bible, a leather bible inside one of those heavy leather book binders with a zipper. There was a small book about discernment in there as well, a few slips of paper that looked like Sunday school notes and crafts, and quite a few loose pieces of paper that had prayers, verses and thoughts written on them.

I had found a bible, but not just any bible – it was battered and old, it was well used and well loved. What I had found was somebody's treasure. So I sat in my car at the side of the road a little south of Carthage, and wondered how I would get this bible back to its owner. There was no name in it – often bibles are inscribed on the inside with a name – but there was nothing like that in this one.

The notes on the papers had no names – there was no clue. The only thing I knew for sure was that this was a book someone loved; it didn't get thrown away on purpose, and it couldn't really have fallen out of a car window, so I was convinced that it had fallen from an open horse drawn buggy. So, with this image of a buggy in my mind I began to drive again, keeping my eyes out for any signs of Amish or Mennonite people.

As I kept driving with no buggies in sight, the sense of urgency passed and I decided to head on up to Meaford, get Taige and worry about this on the way home – and so that's what I did. I found Taige and his friend, loaded them up and we began the return trip.

Once we started getting close to Listowel on the way home we took a little detour to Carthage again – it wasn't really on the way, I had been kind of freestyling behind the wheel on the way up and was on the wrong road, even as I was on the right path. So we got to Carthage, and kept driving south until we passed the point where I had found the bible.

We kept driving, and in not too long we came across a Mennonite church, so we pulled in. The church was open, and someone was inside, so I rather awkwardly explained to the man that I had found this bible at the side of the road and that I thought that it belonged to someone in his congregation. He looked a little confused and odd, so I left it with him and headed out. As we were getting ready to leave he rushed out of the building, came up to the car and said – those papers in the bible – they are the lessons from our Sunday school – this bible does belong to someone here. He promised to find the owner, so off we went, feeling like we had done something good, and served a purpose. A little miracle happened that day in Carthage Ontario.

We say that as Christians that we are Jesus' hands and feet – so when God needed a bible delivered he called on one of his own to do the work. And the work got done.

Now – had I ignored that urge I never would have known what it was that I had missed out on. I would always wonder - maybe it was a purse full of gold coins. Maybe it was a bag of garbage. The point is - I never would have known. But, in following the voice, and seeing what the result was, I learned that the feeling, the urge to stop was actually the voice of my shepherd.

That was one event. To learn to recognize that voice takes repetition. I didn't learn to walk by trying it once, it was a continuous process of stepping out, sometimes walking, often falling. At first it was mostly falling, over time it became mostly walking, and then even running and jumping. Learning the voice of the shepherd takes experience – it takes trial and error.

So – the long and short of it is that if we never obey the voice, if we never do what it says, then we will never see the fruit. If we don't see the fruit, then we won't ever know if it was in fact the voice of Jesus, or just some other voice.

But, when we begin to listen to the voice, when we see the fruits, then we start to recognize and trust the voice. Think of the sheep. The shepherd leads them to green pastures and still waters. If the shepherd led the sheep to thorns and wolves, the sheep would never learn to follow. But, if after following the sheep keep finding lush grass and fresh water, then they will follow that voice forever.

That is why I turned around on the highway. It is because I know that voice. I have learned to recognize that feeling when it comes. Sometimes it's a name of a person that keeps coming to me, somebody I need to stop by and see. Sometimes it's a face on a street-corner or in a restaurant that compels me to talk to them. A gift that I need to buy for a stranger, a word or a bible verse to pass along. It's not always the same urge or feeling, but I'm learning to pick that one voice out of the crowd of voices that surround me every day.

That's not to say that I've never made mistakes – I've followed wrong voices, I've wasted my time before, and I've looked like a fool doing it. I've also turned my back on the voice and later been convicted, knowing in my heart that it was the voice of the shepherd that I had ignored. And in those cases I am the one who loses. When I turn away I don't get to take part in the miracle. But every time I do respond to the voice I get better at recognizing it.

So. Be bold and courageous. God has placed his spirit within you. The spirit within you vibrates like a tuning fork when it hears the voice of the shepherd – were our hearts not burning within us as he spoke - said the two on the road to Emmaus.

I know my sheep, says Jesus. He calls us out by name. Don't forget, there is no food or space in the pen, the green pastures and still waters are outside, and to get there we need to get up and do something when we hear the voice, then surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord your whole life long.

Amen.