

## **“Recognizing the Shepherd’s Voice” based on John 10:1-11 and 1 Samuel 16:10-13**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, April 30, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

When I was a young reporter, I got wind of a secret meeting at the state capital. The sitting assemblyman was getting set to retire, after nearly 30 years in office. At least three candidates in his party wanted to be his successor. There was an upstart in the opposing party who almost won a year earlier, and so, the party leadership wanted to hand pick their favorite to avoid a primary that might damage their chances.

I heard about the meeting from a man who would have been the fourth candidate in that race, had the districts not been redrawn to benefit the opposing party’s candidate and leave him out of the district. He wasn’t in the meeting, but he knew about it and he wanted it to be known.

So, I started calling the people I thought might have been involved. I knew these sources well, through numerous interviews, and even off-the-record social time in area bars and restaurants. I was taught journalism in an era when building long-term relationships was emphasized. Just like medieval inquisitors who couldn’t accept confessions made under torture, I’d build relationships in off-the-record environments and make mental notes. I would only use things I’d heard, if I revisited them during working hours, so as not to violate any confidences.

Time spent with my sources gave a full picture of who they were: their tendencies, their patterns and their preferences – their full personalities, good and bad. Much like any friendship, they knew me and who I was, and I knew them, and who they were. They knew ultimately what I wanted, and I knew their aspirations.

So, I started with the retiring Assemblyman, and got a rough outline of who was there, but nothing was confirmed on the record, so I then had to call them myself. In my conversations, I pieced together what was said in the meeting. Then I tested this information, all of which was given off-the-record, against what I knew about these individuals, and who they were. None of them wanted to be quoted for my story, yet, in the end, I had a good idea of who said what and who was there at a meeting I never attended.

In the end, we published a long story with unnamed sources describing the meeting, while each of the attendees were in the story quoted saying that they declined to comment. Afterward, I got calls from everyone who was in the meeting, and they were irate – they wanted to know who my source was. They thought the story read like it came from someone in the room. Each one wanted to know who it was that told me everything. After all, whichever one told me everything, would surely be disqualified from being chosen by the party leaders.

I refused to divulge my sources to them. I didn’t say they were my sources, and that I knew them so well, I didn’t have to be there to know what happened.

In Chapter nine of John’s gospel, Jesus and his disciples see a man who was born blind. The disciples ask Jesus who sinned in order that this man was being punished – Did his parents’ sin cause his blindness, or was it somehow the man’s own fault? Jesus says neither. This was in order that the works of God might be seen in him. And so, Jesus heals the man by making mud with his saliva and dirt, then wiping it on the man’s eyes, telling him to wash it off. All of this was done on the sabbath, causing some alarm, among the Pharisees, who then started an investigation.

This investigation begins by interviewing the man who was blind, but now can see everything. He tells them what happened, and they wonder out loud about Jesus's identity. They assume that since he healed on the Sabbath, it meant Jesus was a sinner, yet this is a great sign, as no prophet in scripture restored a person's vision, but it was foretold that the Messiah would do it. So, these learned leaders turn to the man who was healed and ask him, and he says Jesus is a prophet, so the Pharisees ask his parents. They don't want to be excluded from their community, and they say to ask their son, who says again, "One thing I know is I was blind, but now I see."

The Pharisees badger the man, asking a third time, and he asks why they want to hear it again. He asks them if they also want to be Jesus's disciples, and they revile him. They say, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses." They throw him out of the community. They decide that was as a born sinner by his blindness, ignoring that he now could see, so then was he forgiven? When Jesus finds the man, he asks if he knows the Son of Man. The man does not but says that he wants to believe in him. Jesus reveals who he is and why he has come. Jesus says he has come so the blind may see and those who say they can see will know they are blind.

Jesus says that if the Pharisees were blind, they would not sin, but claiming to see keeps them in sin. You see, the Pharisees here claim to be the real experts, who follow Moses correctly. They have judged this man, not according to the actual full story of scripture, but according to their narrow interpretation from little pieces of that scripture. They fill in a negative, to assume that sin caused this man's blindness. You see, there are blessings promised for obedience, but the punishment for sin is usually death which comes to us all or the humbling of the proud and powerful. It's not specific ailments inflicted by God on the unfortunate and powerless.

And so, our reading today continues this response, and Jesus welcomes the man born blind. You see, after the Pharisees reject him, Jesus says that he is part of his sheepfold, a part of the community. This is in keeping with scripture's consistent theme of restoration and inclusion, where God first dwells among creation in the garden, and despite humankind's rejection of God, God continues to come down to humanity to correct and restore us. God chose a specific people, not to be the lone beneficiaries, but to be a light to all nations, revealing God to them. And so, Jesus, in his metaphor here shows us, That again, God has come down to us. His voice is the voice of scripture, and it is the Word of God.

Now, the irony of this passage, is that it is easy for us as modern readers to miss the point and get caught up in multiple metaphors that mean nothing to us in our culture today. And so, the blind man himself ends up seeming like a metaphor of some kind, but he is not. He is a real and true instance of God intervening in this world to act in our world. Remember that Jesus says this is about God being revealed here.

We struggle also with Jesus first as the voice of the shepherd. He is the voice that the sheep know and trust, but then then he says he is the gate by which the sheep come and go, and he is lastly, the good shepherd himself, who lays down his life.

And so, there are two things to see here – first, is an outline John gives us, and then its relevance in our lives. The outline is that of John's whole gospel – that Jesus is the Word, in our flesh, the mediator of grace and truth, who dies for us, so that we might have life. Indeed, Jesus is the voice, the voice of God, the very Word of God, who becomes for us the gate, the means by which we belong

to God. This is the gate by which we also go out from God into the world, and he is also the shepherd, our protection who is with us, and lays down his own life for us.

The relevance here is that God is not distant, but near, able to act in this world for us. I could try to inadequately explain first century agriculture to make this clear to you, but instead, consider the story I told at the beginning about the politicians. I had a relationship with those people. I listened to them often. I tried to understand who they were, so that when I wasn't with them and heard about things they were involved in, I could know if it was likely to be true.

And so, in talking to them, I built the story, recognizing them, not by seeing them, but by testing what I heard against what was consistent and relevant, to what I knew about them. Now it seems a terrible sacrilege in our day and age to use politics to understand God, but this isn't about politics – it's about the relationships I described here. It is through relationship that we can recognize the voice of our shepherd.

Too often, like the Pharisees with the man born blind, scripture is taken out of context. It is used to affirm or condemn, not in a manner consistent with God's Word as a whole. Too often, we read scripture in an effort to make God reflect our image, rather than see how we might better reflect God's image in this world.

By this we take a phrase about God's love out of its context, and make love into general permission and license, as if the most loving person or a loving parent is someone like this, who lets their beloved do whatever they want, regardless of whether it is good or bad, or if it may cause them harm.

Or, we take a phrase here or there about God's rejection and even hate of sin, and make God's wrath into some general restriction and condemnation, as if God is just stomping around heaven waiting for a chance to strike us down. It is as if fear were the best way to keep someone in line, on the right path.

Now, I recognize that these are both exaggerated caricatures, but they ring true in some of the things we've seen or heard, or even done, in how scripture is interpreted in our world. So when we hear people claiming to be the voice of the shepherd, or we read things making this claim, how do we recognize the Shepherd's voice?

The truth is that the whole of scripture is about God desiring to be with, present to humanity. Yet, at the same time, God does not come to people without expectations. We are made in God's image and expected to reflect that image in the world, while also recognizing that every person, even those we don't like, has value as an image bearer. So, there is an expectation that we turn toward God, away from sin, and yet also, join with God in loving and redeeming sinners.

This is impossible to balance. How do we understand this? Unless we get help, which comes from the Spirit, which has guided the writing of scripture, revealing the story of who God is. This is so we can read in community, not on our own, but by the Spirit in and among us. And so, we read scripture not in isolation to find in it what we want to hear or find what we expect.

We read scripture in the context of those who wrote those words in the first place, and in conversation with the first interpreters and the great cloud of witnesses before us, including with an openness to what is being said today. We listen not to only those who agree with us, but listening

to those in whom we hear the shepherd, who laid down his power as fully divine, and humbly shared in our humanity, to live in our limits and die for us on that shameful cross, So that we might live, and live life in full – abundantly.

Sisters and brothers, the God of our scriptures is at work in this world, right here and right now. God does not long to destroy the world, but to restore it, to bring a new creation. The story of scripture should challenge each and every one of us to be better, to question our actions and be active in making this world a better place, not by doing our will, but in sharing in God's will for reconciliation. Indeed, our job is not to condemn, but to be witnesses, to share our story of how God is at work in the world.

Knowing who God is, means we lay down our assumptions, or what we want to be true. I could have assumed what went on in that meeting, or speculated my own opinion, but instead, I worked through the relationships that I had with those involved. I worked to be consistent with what I knew about each of them.

As we learned in the selection of David as King, God does not judge as the world judges, and what's more, God can do mighty things with those who might seem like outsiders. So then, when we listen for the voice of the shepherd, we must test whether the voice we here is judging as the world judges? Is it excluding people whom God has called, like the man born blind, whom the Pharisees rejected? Do we read scripture to see God seeking reconciliation over rejection?

Indeed, let us recognize that the voice of the shepherd will NOT affirm your whole identity, to say you are perfect and complete, in all things, even your political and social ideology. NO, the voice of the shepherd will always challenge you and I to be better. This is the voice that we hear throughout all of scripture and from the Word made flesh, Jesus.

Likewise, let us recognize that the voice of the shepherd will NOT condemn you, telling you that you are beyond God's love, nor will it tell you to condemn others. NO, the voice of the shepherd will always embrace you and I to welcome others. This is the voice that we hear throughout all of scripture and from the Word made flesh, Jesus.

The voice of the shepherd changes us. It challenges us to have our eyes opened to see the injustices of this world and to enter into the ministry of reconciliation, to bring grace and truth, the very person and work of our Lord Jesus, right into this world and be a part of God's restoration of all things. The voice of the shepherd welcomes us into the fold. It calls us to follow into its safety and out to the pastures.

Beloved, know that you are loved, and when you hear those speaking as if they are the voice of God, test it by the relationship you build with God through scripture and the witness of the historic faith of our church. Recognize what is consistent with who the shepherd really is because that is the voice to guide us into eternal and abundant life, right now and right here. Amen.