

Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

Easter 4 B
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Listening For The One Voice

There is a seasonal stream that runs through the middle of our property ... beyond that stream is pasture, a little fruit orchard, blackberries and wild roses, and on this side of the stream is our backyard, filled with gardens and a very large and very old frost peach tree. It probably should come out – it is finished making peaches and it sends suckers up all over the garden. But the way it stretches out its limbs in every direction, offering a bit of shade and such a haven for the birds always takes my mind away from the garden remodeling project and I find myself just watching the birds fly from the feeders to the peach tree, to the feeders and back to that tree. That big old peach tree is always filled with birds. We are rich with birds in the springtime.

At the feeders just outside the kitchen window, there are gold finches, pine siskins, nuthatches, purple finches, robins, stellar jays, spotted towhees, house sparrows, hummingbirds, chickadees, red winged blackbirds and golden-crowned kinglets. We are visited by a pair of ducks most days and every once in awhile, by the hawk or the great blue heron. There is a glorious cacophony that begins just before the early dawn light and continues on until the frogs take up the singing just after dark. Our backyard is a little Eden and while there are very few things in the world that will get me to sit still, I get lost, and time disappears when I'm watching the birds.

I've known the names of most of the birds for some time now, yet it has taken me years to be able to identify their songs. I can't simply lift the binoculars to my eyes and look in the favorite bird book. As it turns out, identifying bird songs takes a great deal of patience. And stillness. I have to sit quietly, for long periods sometimes, listening and looking for a particular bird to match the song I hear. Some of them are easy – the red winged blackbird was the first one I learned. But some of them are very tricky. And there are so very many birds with so very many songs, that it's often impossible to discern whose song I'm hearing.

The world beyond my little backyard Eden is filled with a multitude of voices too, but most of them are not so melodious: email, text messages, phone calls, tweets; car horns honking, people yelling, televisions blasting, music blaring, pundits punditting. Our world is so full of so much noise, that we have ceased to hear it. Like the people who live next to the freeway, the sound that is always there ceases to be recognizable as sound at all. It is silence that seems out of place these days, because culturally, we don't seem to know what to do with ourselves if we aren't being stimulated from every direction. In this world of clatter and din, it's nearly impossible to distinguish between the varied voices clamoring for our attention. Everywhere we turn, we're assaulted by voices telling us who we ought to be, what we ought to care about, how we ought to live. It is as exhausting as it is endless. So it's no wonder we can hardly hear the one voice we really long for, the one voice we really need to hear. The voice of the Good Shepherd is out there, and it's always calling us into the fold. But in the midst of the noisy chaos of our daily

lives, hearing that voice can be a bit tricky. It isn't just a matter of turning down the volume of the world. While that will help, it isn't enough. We somehow need to learn to listen for the one voice, to tune our hearts to that voice, to distinguish the voice of our Shepherd from all the other voices that are constantly clamoring for our attention. *"I know my own and my own know me"* Jesus says. *"The sheep that belong to me hear my voice ... and they follow me."*

My husband tells a story of visiting the sheep market in Jerusalem, a place where shepherds bring their sheep "in trucks, vans and even the back seats of cars..."¹ All of the sheep are put in to a giant stone corral and the buying and selling begins. It's hard to imagine how the shepherds keep track of their own, but what Jesus said is really true about sheep. "The sheep that belong to me hear my voice ... and they follow me." All throughout that stone corral, each sheep was attuned to its own shepherd's voice, and despite the bleating and the bargaining, not one of them was lost or lost track of.

Even in the midst of our cacophonous world, we too can hear the voice of our own Shepherd. We hear Jesus' voice in so many places – in birdsong, in hymnody, in our own sacred stories, in the Holy Scriptures. The imagery of God in today's readings is among the most beautiful and comforting we ever hear. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.* As comforting as they are, those words are actually quite challenging. Because if we really do believe that the Lord is our shepherd, it necessarily follows that we are the sheep. And as it turns out, we're not actually very much interested in being sheep. We're not really interested in being completely and utterly reliant on the Shepherd, going only where our Shepherd leads us, being yanked out of places we're curious about, being led around like - well, like sheep. I think we long for the things that are promised to us when the Lord is our shepherd, we just don't really think we want to be the sheep. We live in a world where following is frowned upon – something done by sort of sheepish people. And still, in order to live in right relationship with our loving Shepherd, follow, we must.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. If we allow the Lord to be our Shepherd, to lead us and guide us, to be the one voice we long for and tune our hearts to, we will not be in want. As it turns out, all it takes for us to have everything we need, everything we want, is complete and total surrender to God. No problem! We laugh, and still it's true. We really can be completely free from want by simply relying on God. Which necessarily means that we surrender our reliance on ourselves, on what we are, what we have and what we do. That we let loose of the control we so often cling to and allow ourselves to receive life as gift rather than possession.

My dears, when we tune our hearts to the voice of the Good Shepherd we will hear what that complete reliance on God affords us.

...the peacefulness and gentle new growth of green pastures.

...a home in the place of stillness, where the water is calm and where our souls are restored.

¹ <https://jimfriedrich.com/2015/04/26/the-voice-that-calls-us-a-reflection-for-good-shepherd-sunday/>

...the comfort and protection of a rod that wards off enemies and a staff that reaches out to tenderly pull us back into the fold when we begin to stray into the places of darkness and danger.

...the delight of being well fed...

sacramentally anointed...

filled to overflowing, full of the grace and goodness and mercy only God can offer.

Of course our longing for our Shepherd's voice is real. So let the longing be sacred, let the longing be felt, let the longing be heard. Let's not let the minutia of life vaporize our days and weeks and months and years until we find that we've lost our capacity for fine tuning, lost the capacity to hear the red winged blackbird as distinct from the purple finch or the golden crowned kinglet. There is more than noise out there, I promise you.

"I know my own and my own know me," Jesus says. *"Everyone who belongs to me knows my voice."* Somewhere in the depths of our very beings, we are already tuned to the voice of God. We were made for God, made to hear God's voice, and if we allow our longing for God to take root in us, if we nurture it and keep it from being drowned out by all the other noise, we will find our hearts tuned to the one voice. You know that voice... Listen...

"Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." That's the voice. *"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?"* That's the voice. *"Believe in the name of Jesus Christ and love one another as he has commanded us."* That's the voice. *"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."* That is the voice we are listening for. It is the voice of love that calls every single one of us, everyone, everywhere into the one flock, where all are loved and tended by the good Shepherd. To hear this voice and be guided by it is to live in God's world, on earth as it is in heaven. *"I know my own and my own know me,"* Jesus says – and we are all his own.

It isn't always easy to discern the Shepherd's voice. Sometimes we grow hard of hearing. Sometimes the world is just too loud. But the one voice, the voice of Love never stops calling, calling us into the fold, calling each one of us by name, calling us to love and more love. Listen. Amen

