

My Sheep Know My Voice
John 10:22-30
Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C May 11, 2025
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome on this special day when we honor mothers and those who have taken on the joys and challenges of motherhood to love us and guide us on our way. We recognize that today can be difficult for those of you who may have recently lost your own mom, as well as those of you who dearly wanted children that you never had. Or perhaps your mom was not able to be the kind of loving example that you needed. Still, we want to give thanks for these special women in our lives.

Perhaps you know that Mother's Day began in the United States early in the 20th century, thanks to [Anna Jarvis](#) of West Virginia. She was the daughter of Ann Reeves Jarvis, who is credited for creating Mothers' Day Work Clubs where local moms were taught childcare strategies. During the Civil War, the clubs also served as common ground where mothers would promote reconciliation among Union and Confederate soldiers.

When her mom died in 1905, Anna Jarvis wanted to create a holiday that honored the "[sacrifices mothers made for their children](#)." The first Mother's Day was celebrated at St. Andrew's Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia, on May 10, 1908. In the years following, Anna participated in a letter-writing campaign to push for Mother's Day to be adopted across the nation. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson designated it a national holiday.

In addition to the United States, many other countries around the world honor mothers on a particular day. Our celebration is relatively new, since such special holidays date back to the ancient Greeks and Romans who held festivals for Rhea and Cybele (*sai' bel*), the mother goddesses. We give thanks for moms everywhere and trust that you will honor yours in whatever way possible today.

In addition to being Mother's Day, this Sunday is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday in the church. So let's turn our attention now to our Gospel reading for today from John, chapter 10, verses 22-30. We need to set the stage for this important scene, which occurred well before Jesus' death. He's had some dust-ups with the Pharisees, most recently because he had healed a man who had been blind from birth. The healing itself may not have been a huge problem, but the fact that Jesus did that on the sabbath was a serious no-no (John 9). Jesus chides his detractors for their spiritual blindness.

And then, as chapter 10 opens, Jesus identifies himself with two "I AM" sayings: "I am the gate for the sheep" (10:7), and "I am the good shepherd" (10:11). The idea of the good shepherd was well known. Just think of Psalm 23. But people were also aware that there were bad shepherds, which in Ezekiel 34:1-10 are identified as the "shepherds of Israel," that is, the religious leadership.

Their response to Jesus is one of division. Some think he is demon-possessed and out of his mind; others don't believe that someone who is infested with demons can heal the eyes of a blind man. This must have been a heated discussion! Apparently, the two factions could not come to an agreement.

As we move to verse 22, we find that autumn, the season of the Festival of Booths, has passed and that the winter Festival of the Dedication is now in progress. We more commonly

call this holiday Hanukkah or the Festival of Lights. It commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem after it was liberated from Syrian-Greek (Seleucid) rule under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. A menorah (kind of candelabra) was lit on eight consecutive days. Oil was scarce, but what was available was miraculous enough to last for eight days until more oil could be procured. This holiday reminds us that light of God wins out over darkness.

As Jesus was walking in the temple, some Jewish people gather around him, asking point blank if he is the Messiah. This is an important question, though it is the only time in John's Gospel where Jesus is directly asked if he is the Messiah. Jesus doesn't give his questioners a direct yes or no answer. Instead, he refers to other times where he has made his identity clear (John 5:31-37; 8:28-29, 38; 10:14-16). Unfortunately, despite his repeated claims, the authorities do not believe him.

Jesus explains their inability to believe: They do not belong to his sheep (10:20). He is picking up the image of the shepherd that he used earlier in the chapter. He is also harking back to Old Testament understandings of the good shepherd as one who lovingly cares for his sheep.

Jesus insists that his sheep know his voice. As you are well aware, I'm a suburban gal with no farming experience whatsoever, though I will admit to fascination with both sheep and llamas. So, I did a bit of research on how shepherds interact with their sheep. We can go back to verse 7 where we are told that Jesus is the gate for the sheep. Shepherds would take their flocks out during the day to graze, but come evening, the animals would be penned so as to be protected from wild animals and not wander off. These enclosures were often made of stone and had an opening so the sheep could enter and exit. One of the shepherds would act as the guard at the gate to keep the animals in and predators, including thieves, out. In the morning, the shepherds would go to the enclosure where their sheep were penned and call them to come out. The animals knew their own shepherd's voice. They would come through the gate at the sound of his voice, but would not follow another shepherd. When the sheep heard the sound of their own shepherd's voice, they knew they could trust him and so left the safety of the pen willingly. Sheep not of that shepherd's fold would just wait until their own shepherd called.

When Jesus' sheep hear his voice, they follow him. This should not surprise on two levels. Most basically, as we've said, sheep follow their own master's voice. That reminds me of the RCA trademark dog, Nipper, who sits with his head cocked, peering into the horn of a Victrola. Nipper is awake and alert because he recognizes his master's voice. I imagine he's wondering how his master squeezed into that little box. But still, he is waiting attentively.

The other level of recognition, though, is that Jesus' sheep have been called to follow him. We know that as Jesus' disciples we are to listen and obey him. We are to share in word and deed what we know about Jesus and tell others how he has made a difference in our lives.

By the time we get to verse 27, we've moved beyond the Old Testament understanding of the shepherd caring for his sheep, as well as the very literal understanding of sheep following their master. In this verse, Jesus tells his listeners that he gives them "eternal life, and they will never perish." Jesus asserts that he is in charge; no one will snatch his sheep out of his hand (10:28). Nor can anyone snatch them out of God's hand. What reassuring thoughts!

We conclude today's reading with a difficult saying found in verse 30, "The Father and I are one." Living centuries after the church supposedly settled the question of the Son and the

Father being of the same essence, we might just gloss over this verse. But we would be wrong to do that. The church of John's day toward the end of the first century had no knowledge of what we would call Trinitarian theology. They were not able to proclaim that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were God in three persons.

That said, what could John 10:30 possibly mean? Many commentators suggest that Jesus and the Father *function* as one. They do the same kind of work. Gail R. O'Day helped us to better understand the relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father in the Gospel of John when she wrote in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. IX, page 679):

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus does not claim to be a second God or somehow to replace God or to "make himself" God. Rather, Jesus claims to know God as no human has ever known God, to be one with God in will and work for the salvation of the world. The truth, and the believer's experience of it, is the ultimate shaping factor in the Fourth Gospel narrative.

Wow! There sure is a lot of meat on the bones of these few verses. But where does that leave us this morning? Can you honestly say that you can hear the shepherd's voice? I don't mean that you audibly hear him call you by name. But in your heart of hearts can you sense that he is calling you? If so, what are you being asked to do? Who are you being called to help? Are you willing to say yes to Jesus, even if his call disrupts your plans or costs you money?

Many of us know this intimate, still, small voice. But others of us are spiritually hard of hearing. Do we need inner hearing aids? Okay, we're not going to have some kind of gizmos installed in our heads. But what if we could find ways to listen for God? What if we could experience listening for God as cultivating a spiritual relationship with Jesus? What can we do to seek God's presence in our ordinary lives?

Here are some ideas I've found that may be useful to you. First, to discern what God is saying to you, you need to have a quiet space in which to listen. You might have a table with a Bible and candles, for example. You may prefer to meet God in nature while taking a walk or sitting on a boat. However you choose to create and use this sacred space, just make sure that you have a time and place to devote your attention to God.

A major way to hear God's voice is, of course, to read your Bible. But don't just do that as if you're reading a novel or a newspaper. Read it carefully and prayerfully. What is in a particular Scripture for you? Does it call you to change something you're doing or take on a new attitude? If you need to make a change, pray that God will show you how to do this. Think about your Bible reading as a conversation with God. Remember that the Psalms are great prayers, so if you need a place to begin, you might consider these 150 nuggets.

Let's be honest. We've all attended school, and there are many times that we sat listening to the teacher blathering on about nothing we're interested in! We weren't getting much from that lesson. Our minds wander to an upcoming game or social event. But if we practice active listening, we'll stay focused on the topic at hand. We may ask: What is God trying to tell me? Is this word a correction to something I'm doing wrong? Is it pulling me into a new way of seeing God and neighbor in the world? Is it prodding me to talk with someone? Whatever God is trying to tell you, remember that the Holy Spirit is guiding this conversation. Pay attention! Your thoughts, attitudes, and even intuitions can help you discern God's message for you.

If I really want to hear the voice of the shepherd, you may want to try journaling or keeping a spiritual diary. Many giants of the faith, including John Wesley, made regular journal entries.

He started a few months before his ordination in 1725 and continued right up until his death in 1791. With a diary or journal at hand, you can keep track of your thoughts, questions, and emotions. It's instructive to go back and read what you wrote several years ago. What has changed? Did you get some answers?

Now here's the hard part: We have to trust what God is telling us and follow in his footsteps where he leads us. It may not be where we think we want to go, but it will be the place where God would have us to be. The older I get and the more years I have to look back on my spiritual journey, the more convinced I am that this is absolutely true. Yes, detours can occur, but only when I'm not listening and obeying what I believe God is telling me.

Thank you for listening so patiently to another sermon where we took a deep dive into the Scriptures. I appreciate your being attentive to the sound of my voice and truly pray that somehow you have heard the voice of God through all the static. I thought you might enjoy another lighthearted story to close today's sermon:

Pastor Ed Vasicek reports that an officer stopped a driver and asked, "What are you doing with that sheep? You should take it to the zoo." The following week, the same police officer sees the same man with the same sheep in the front seat, with both of them wearing sunglasses. The police officer pulls him over. "I thought you were going to take that sheep to the zoo!" the officer said. The man replied, "I did. We had such a good time we are going to the beach this weekend!"

PS Thanks to all who led worship in my absence last Sunday. I was suddenly hit with vertigo on Saturday morning and needed time to get back on board. Missed you all!

Nan