

“Emerge: Moving from Darkness to Light: Becoming Attentive Christians”

John 10:1-10

May 14, 2017

Rev. Susan H Ewing

We have arrived at the Fourth part of our Emerge Series: Moving from Darkness to Light; becoming Attentive Christians. This well-known passage from John’s Gospel sheds light on our focus today as we look at Jesus, the Good Shepherd; who goes after the one who is lost; who knows each sheep by name and calls them to listen to his voice as they follow; and who leads his sheep beside the still waters. If you are like me, you may be thinking what a wonderful passage. This is a beautiful image for Mother’s Day: the One who knows us through and through, who cares for us and supplies all our needs. Well yes, except that on closer look it causes quite a challenge for the preacher who is given the task of comparing the congregation to sheep. A dilemma, in that most of us tend to think of sheep as dumb, slobbering, wayward animals who just don’t know any better.*

So imagine my gratitude when I discovered that sheep are not as dumb as we think. Preacher extraordinaire, Barbara Brown Taylor, shares some wonderful insights about sheep in her book “The Preaching Life.” She boldly claims, “Sheep are not dumb at all. It is the cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not

work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows, but you lead sheep and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first--- namely, their shepherd---who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.”*

She goes on to say, “Sheep tend to grow fond of their shepherds. A shepherd can walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step foot in the fold without causing pandemonium. Sheep seem to consider their shepherds as part of the family, and the relationship that grows up between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to. A good shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure, while the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue means food, or a two note song means that it is time to go home. They know who they belong to; they know their shepherds voice and it is the only one they will follow.”*

Shepherds and Sheep. Perhaps not as familiar in our everyday but one that is used frequently in Scripture, especially by Jesus, as it was a significant part of everyday life for many that listened to Jesus’ teachings. And, so this image was a useful one in explaining the relationship between God and people. For the early followers of Jesus this was an important image to understand who Jesus was as the

Son of God. And, when they heard the story about sheep and shepherds they also remembered who they were as followers of Christ. After Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, despite the joy of knowing Jesus was alive and the task of sharing this good news with the world, many continued to live in fear of a similar fate.

Persecutions against Jesus followers had increased; gatherings took place in secret; the world was a scary place as friends and neighbors were carried off to arenas with the lions, like sheep to the slaughterhouse.

So the story about Jesus being a Good Shepherd was told to counter living in the darkness of fear. It offered comfort to know that Jesus can call each one by name and knows each one through. It gave them hope that the one to whom they belonged would call to them and despite the other voices all around...they would hear and know his voice. And, that their shepherd would lead them to greener pastures.

And so, we nod our heads...agreeing wholeheartedly at first.....we know and love Jesus and most certainly Jesus knows us through and through and loves us despite ourselves. But that's where the irony comes in. As his sheep, we are to hear and recognize and follow his voice. Yet at times, that voice comes to us in ways we may not fully understand---in parables and stories that turn our understanding upside down creating more questions and confusion as to what Jesus was really talking about. As our passage from John noted in verse 6, "Jesus used

this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”

But don't be too alarmed. That happens at times among herds of sheep. Even today, when shepherds lead their flock to graze on the hillside or to a drink at a common watering hole, other herds come too and the flocks mingle together. But, when it is time to go, the shepherds make their sound to gather them to together. At times, the sounds are competing sometimes drowning each other out. Sometimes losing a sheep in the mix...although a shepherd will continue to search until one is found, calling out until the sheep can hear and return to the fold. While a good sheep will continue to remain attentive to the distinct voice of the shepherd listening closely in the midst of the noise.

Has that ever happened to you? Say, if you are talking on the phone; perhaps the TV is on; one child has a question to ask; another is looking for help. In the chaos of all the sounds and noises, Mom (or teacher) says, “wait I can hear when everyone is talking at once!” It takes focus and attention to hear and to understand the one to whom we are listening.

I count it a joy to be in a church family that supports and encourages our youngest members to help lead in worship as they did last week for youth Sunday. If you remember, Wyatt and Daniel talked about being in a band and the experience they have had of each player playing a piece on their own and knowing

that is good. But, it is so much better when all the players play together to make a greater sound. Have you ever tried to listen to a piece of music and pick out one part or one instrument? It can be difficult.

Some of you may know that my brother is a professional musician. He is a Saxophonist and has the privilege of playing all around the world and for many famous people. He is an amazing and gifted musician. I remember when he was in middle school and began on the clarinet and would practice every night...which wasn't so bad behind the closed door of his room. But as he continued into high school he began to play the tenor sax and then joined a Saxophone quartet that needed a baritone sax and at times they had him play a bass saxophone.....each one bigger and much louder than the one before. So much so, that my mom finally said enough! You have to practice outside (which by the way, caused all the neighbors dogs to howl and we could still hear him inside the house).

A few years later this Saxophone quartet won a competition in New York City including cutting their first album. Needless to say, we were all excited when we first heard the album. I remember listening to the music, waiting to hear the sound of his instrument and the part he played. It was quite difficult. I had to stop and go back and listen again, each time more closely than before. With three other instruments, I had to pay close attention to the deeper notes. Often it would get lost under the melody. Sometimes, I knew the part he played because I had

heard him practicing. A few times, there would be one song would feature him and his part was clear; other times, a particular piece would lift up the alto or the tenor and I couldn't really tell if he was in there. Regardless, when he played with the others, I had to become more attentive to hear his part in the piece.

This is much like our own lives. All around are voices competing for our attention most every day. Do this to be faster; do that to be happier, richer, younger stronger, more beautiful, more healthy . The voices chatter non-stop.....from every direction...the TV, podcast, Facebook, twitter, even our own voices within. And yet, the one who knows us through and through is calling to us to lead us to still waters and green pastures.

So, if at times, it seems as if you are having trouble hearing the voice of your Shepherd, don't panic. Rest assured that it takes time and careful listening. Some days listening for the voice of the Shepherd will be distinct and clear rising above all the chatter like a beautiful song; some days it may sound faint and so far away that it is difficult to understand. And so, you will have to draw closer so you don't miss it and find yourself left behind.

The key is to practice paying attention to the Shepherd's Voice. The easy part of paying attention is that it can happen at any time. The challenge comes in that the Voice of the Shepherd isn't always in words or complete sentences. It doesn't always come when we want it. Though, at times it is a thought that pops in

your head out of nowhere (where did that come from—from you, Good Shepherd?); sometimes it comes in a feeling of caution or unease (Is that your voice, Good Shepherd?). Sometimes it will come in a feeling of being in the right moment or doing the thing you were design to do (yes, this is you Good Shepherd). The more you practice becoming attentive you will know...you will know because the voice of the One that knows you through and through will call you and will search for you until you are found and will ever so tenderly lead you to green pastures beside the still waters to give you rest and to give life abundant.

*Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*.