

The Voice

John 10:22-30

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery at Duke Chapel on April 21, 2013

Jesus, the eternal Word of God, speaks. But this is not surprising as he is the Word made flesh. Speaking is what he does as divine Word. He does who he is—the Word of God. At the beginning of creation, God speaks the world into existence—“‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” In the beginning, we hear “And God said” over and over again. Speech is at the heart of God’s creative activity. If we can say anything about God, we can say that God speaks. For some theologians, *Deus dixit*, ‘God has spoken,’ is the starting point for theological reflection. God speaks and when God uses God’s voice, something happens, something changes. God knows “how to do things with words”(JL Austin). Worlds are created. Storms are stopped. We used to hear in an old TV commercial that “when E.F. Hutton talks, people listen.” When God talks, people may not always listen but something happens. What happens to you when God speaks?

It is not surprising that Jesus as the good shepherd says, “My sheep hear my voice.” Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, speaks. In the Greek, it literally is “the sheep—the ones that are mine—my voice—they hear.” The stress is on “my voice” as opposed to other voices. Jesus wants to make it clear that it is his voice we should be listening for. No where in this passage do we hear of sheep talking. And the only thing that sheep might say anyway is “baa baa.” “My sheep [us] hear my voice.” To hear God’s voice in the Old Testament meant obeying the law and the message of God through the prophets. To be sheep meant to be in an intimate, covenantal relationship with God. A relationship in which the sheep knew God and God knew them, even by name (Ex 33:12, 17; Isa 43:1). Jesus emphasizes “my voice” because there are other voices out there. Loud, raspy, nasal, high-pitched voices. Not the kind like James Earl Jones whose voice we hear as Darth Vader in Star Wars or in the tagline “This is CNN.”

But loud noises and high-pitched sounds that frighten sheep. The sounds of bombs banging at the Boston Marathon, brutalizing many, maiming some, and killing three, including an eight year old boy. Once again we hear the disturbing voice of violence on the siren-filled streets of America. A cacophony of terroristic noises that can easily mute the voice of Christ in our midst as a city like Boston is put on lockdown. The voice of Jesus does not get much air time these days. The loud perpetual noises of violence do and grab our attention and draw our ears in that direction as sheep, even as we hear of violence and the threat of violence closer to home in Durham. The voice of violence may just be the threat of violence as we see from North Korea highlighted in the media or the intent to do harm through mailed letters to political leaders containing ricin. Just the threat can be loud and intimidating so much so that we attempt to run as far away as possible to hide in a fetal position of fear.

Jesus is under threat, too, as he speaks. He’s in Jerusalem (v.22) where he will be crucified. Some think he has a demon and is out of his mind (v.20). Some want to stone him (v.31) and even arrest him (v.39). His voice is surrounded by violence. And because the volume of violence is so high, at times it’s difficult to distinguish the voice of Jesus from others. These other voices hinder us from hearing the voice of Christ. We may even think that this is his voice, full of anxiety and fear and chaos and hatred and anger. Or, we may even think that he no longer speaks.

Yet, Jesus, through speech, his word as the Word, tells us via his voice what he is all about in John. And it is not chaos and it is not fear. He says, I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate of the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the true vine. The voice of Jesus says “I am.” In Exodus, God tells Moses to tell the people that his name is “I am who I am”(Ex 3:14). In John, Jesus uses the same phrase (‘I am’) 23 times to let us know

that he is God. His voice is the voice of God, which is why he can say “before Abraham was, I am” (8:58) and “The Father and I are one.” This is the message of his voice. And he says, “My sheep hear my voice.”

He tells us his content but he doesn’t tell us about the quality or pitch of his voice. So how are we to know if we are hearing his voice? Jesus tells us that the Spirit will declare his word to us. We will hear his voice through the Spirit (16:12-15). Yet, he doesn’t tell us what that sounds like. But he does say what it looks like or what happens to you when God speaks. “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” My sheep follow me. Those who hear his voice, follow him. Sheep are good followers, even if it’s to the slaughter. We follow Christ because we hear his voice. Following him is a sign that you have heard and hear his voice. Hearing his voice does not mean that you understand everything he says because who among us understands everything? Hearing his voice means that you follow him, you trust the way, because he is the way. You may ask as some did, “How long will you keep us in suspense?” and never get the answer you want because Jesus doesn’t always make it plain. When he calls, he just says, “Come and see.” When he calls, he just says, “Follow me.” His call doesn’t come with a five year strategic plan in place. If you want Jesus to do that, good luck!

But his sheep still follow, though the way may not always be clear, because there is something about his voice that draws you. In the physiological study of the human voice, there is what is called the vagus nerve. This nerve connects the brain to everything from the tongue, pharynx, vocal chords, lungs, heart, stomach and intestines to different glands that produce enzymes and hormones. This nerve links the voice to the heart and really the whole body and as the vocal cords vibrate it impacts the brain, heart, lungs, stomach and other parts. Theologically, the vibrations of the voice of Jesus stir our hearts through a Trinitarian nerve so that we follow him. When he speaks, something happens—we feel it in our hearts, in our guts, in our minds. We wouldn’t be here if that wasn’t the case. We may not know exactly what his voice means, but we continue to follow because he speaks by his Spirit. And his Spirit of love moves our hearts. It’s really indescribable. As the old church mothers would say “something got a hold of me.” Someone got a hold of me. Someone’s voice has a hold of our hearts and so we follow, follow, follow, follow, follow the yellow brick road of the Wizard of Oz?

No. You trust the shepherd’s voice and follow the good shepherd even if it is down the road less travelled. Down to a Jerusalem road where the good shepherd lays down his life (10:11,18) and where the lights of the festival of Dedication, Hanukkah, dim in the impending darkness. “My sheep hear my voice...they follow me.” And where he leads may surprise you. When we follow the voice of Christ, we follow him wherever he goes and in John, he goes to face evil and its torturous weapons. He goes to confront it head on. He does not shrink back from it because though it might appear that evil will win, he destroys it ultimately through the cross and resurrection. His voice says “no to evil and death” in any form and when we follow him, he calls us to do the same. He calls us to face evil and to tell hell, “go to hell.”

His voice will lead you to a place of death and life. The voice of Jesus is the voice that we are to follow, the voice that resonates with our whole being and tugs at our whole hearts through a Spiritual nerve, the voice that fills our whole body because he is our food and drink, our life sustenance at the communion table. At the table, he nourishes us but also emboldens us to do God’s will on earth for such a time as this.

So come to the table in your sheep’s clothing. Come even if all you can say is “baa baa.” He’ll accept you just as you are, as sheep in his flock. Come as his flock in need of hearing his voice over and over again. When he speaks, something will happen, something will change, especially when he says, “This is my body broken for you. This is the cup of my blood shed for you.” Worlds will be created. Storms will be stopped. Come taste and see and follow his voice and word made visible at this table, an outward sign of an inward reality, the inaudible and invisible made tangible. And as you follow him and feed on him, you may hear his voice say, “I am the bread [for] [your] life.” And you will discover that not only does Jesus speak, but his word is your food. Bon appetit.