

Voice at the Gate
Easter 4 – Good Shepherd Sunday
May 7, 2017
Trinity Bixby
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[John 10:1-10, 14-16](#)
[Isaiah 43:1-7](#)

A few years ago, when I was living in Corona, New Mexico, I came home from a long trip to find that my across-the-street neighbor had bought three lambs from the state fair. These lambs were incredibly cute and cuddly – with their big eyes and short little bodies, they looked like cartoon animals brought to life. But they were clearly not used to living in a small pen – they ran from one side to the other, bleating constantly. Now, my office had a window that faced the sheep, and though their bleating was cute at first, it gradually drove me to distraction. So, I decided to try something – I walked outside of the house, faced the sheep-pen at my neighbors – and said “maa-aaa” in my finest imitation of their bleats. Immediately, they settled down – stopped bleating, and one that had been walking from one side of the pen to the other lay down on the ground. Satisfied, I walked back into the house – and then got to thinking: *What does “maa-aaa” mean in Sheep-tongue?*

Perhaps I was thinking of the old joke about cats and dogs – most of us end up imitating their voices at one point or another, saying “woof!” to dogs and “mew” to cats. Well, if we could understand their responses, the dogs would be saying “Hey! You speak Dog? That’s great! I have no idea what you said, but good try! Here, let me teach you – woof, woof!”

Meanwhile, the cats would be saying, “Oh, are you trying to speak Cat? What you said makes no sense, so until you get it exactly right, I’m going to ignore you.”

I’m still not entirely sure what I actually said to the lambs, but I’m glad they seemed to give me credit for trying. I didn’t get to improve my sheep-tongue, as the lambs soon were sent out to the ranch, where they had lots of room to wander about and eat the grass of the high plains. I did get to visit another sheep-ranch, though, and learned that even today, sheep come back to a

protected area to sleep, no matter how far they've wandered during the day. If they get lost, they listen for the calls of their fellow sheep – and especially the voice of their shepherd. Even if there are multiple herds of sheep grazing on common land, the sheep know their shepherd's voice, and will come to their shepherd alone.

In John's Gospel, we see this same idea at work. Many villages in Galilee and Judea had communal sheep-folds, where the sheep owned by many families would shelter together. That way, one family at a time could watch over them, instead of every family having to keep watch constantly. Now, if you owned sheep, and wanted to take them out of the fold to graze, you would turn up at the gate, and the family watching the sheep that day would let you call out to your sheep to follow you to the trails. If you didn't go to the gate, instead climbing over a fence, and grabbing a lamb, it was pretty clear that you weren't the owner of the lamb. In John, Jesus uses this example to show what it means to be the true shepherd. A true shepherd doesn't use violence, doesn't sneak in, doesn't steal the sheep away. No – a true shepherd calls the sheep by name, and they know the shepherd and follow where the shepherd leads.

But, this story wasn't understood – so Jesus tries to make it more plain: He says, "I assure you, I am the gate for the sheep... whoever enters through me will be saved. They will be able to come in and go out. They will find everything they need. A thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy – but I came to give life – life that is full and good." All well and good – but why, in trying to clarify, does Jesus say, "I am the gate." That's – confusing, at best, to us today. But take a look at the picture on your bulletin cover – the shepherd is standing at the entry to the sheepfold. Folds like this would be used when the sheep couldn't make it back to the village at night. Notice that there's no door, or gate to the fold – it's an opening, that's fairly wide, but still small enough for a person laying down to block it completely. And that's exactly what shepherds at folds like these would do – the shepherd becomes the gate, keeping the sheep inside.

When Jesus says, "I am the Gate", he's claiming to be the shepherd – and will directly state so a few chapters later. And unlike my futile attempts to speak lamb-tongue, Jesus not only speaks our language, but calls each of us by name.

Now, names have a certain power in today's world – we sign our name to contracts big and small as a symbol of honor. We also tend to look up, or answer, if someone says a name that's even a little like ours – which causes confusion and giggles in coffeeshops and classrooms alike. In the ancient world, names were believed to possess power over a person. It was believed that a child's name shaped their destiny – and that if you knew someone's true name, you would have power over them. That's what's going on in the Rumpelstiltskin fairy-tale – knowing his true name gave the young woman power over him. People would take particular pains to hide their true names, going by nicknames except with close family. But listen to what God says through the Prophet Isaiah: "Fear not; I have redeemed you. I have called you by name – you are mine!" God calls us by name, claiming ultimate power over us – and tells us not to fear, because God has claimed us. God has priority. Now, if God were vengeful, terrible, or tyrannical, that would be a scary statement. But God is love – and God's claim of us is a claim of grace, of freedom, and love. Jesus reminds us that the sheep are free to go in and come out – that they have freedom of motion, can seek the fold when needing shelter, and can seek food when hungry. The True Shepherd cares for the flock, leading them to new pastures and into safety when needed.

That God calls us by our true name is vitally important. You see, the Jewish people were intimately familiar with being re-named by their conquerors – and no where is this more clear than in the story of Daniel and his friends, Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah. Their names have specific meanings in Hebrew – Daniel means "God is my Judge," while the other three mean "Adonai is Gracious" "Who is like God?" and "Adonai Helps", respectively. When they were carried to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem, they were all renamed: Balthazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Their names, their identities, were changed to fit the language of their oppressors – but they remembered that God called them by their true names, and were not afraid, even in the midst of those who were trying to harm them.

Sadly, we Americans have acted more like the Babylonians from this story than the Hebrew people. In encountering native people, not only did we force different names on them – either changing the syllables to something quote

“more pronounceable” – like Hiawatha from Haio-went-ha, or turning the Chavez into Jarvis – or just assigning a new name altogether, like was done routinely on plantations and in native boarding schools. My friends, take care to learn someone’s name – as they would have you say it – and you’ll go far in showing the love and respect for people that God does.

Not every contact between native peoples and Europeans led to this level of disrespect and, ultimately, violence. Think of how differently things would be if we took Jesus’ reminder that there are sheep in folds different from ours more seriously! For instance, let me tell you the story of Rev. Egerton Young, who was a Methodist minister and missionary in 19th century Saskatchewan, Canada. As a young minister, riding circuit between far-flung churches, he befriended a fellow minister who was of the Cree peoples, and learned their Algonquin dialect. Rev. Young and his wife went to live in a lodge with several families of the Cree who had never heard the Gospel stories, and proceeded to teach the message of God’s love for the world. After Rev. Young finished with a prayer, one of the elders said, “When you spoke of the Great Spirit just now, did I hear you say, “Our Father”? This is very new and sweet to me. We never thought of the great Spirit as Father. We heard him in the thunder; we saw him in the lightening, the tempest, and the blizzard, and we were afraid. So when you tell us that the great Spirit is our Father, that is very beautiful to us.” After a moment, he went on to ask, “Missionary, did you say that the Great Spirit is *your* Father?” Of course, Rev. Young answered, “Yes!” “And did you also say that the Great Spirit is Father of the Cree?” “I did!” “Then, we are brothers!”

Truly, we are all children of God – and God calls us by name. Soon after God says, “I have called you by name – you are mine” in Isaiah, God says “...everyone is called by my name....” In other words, God calls us – all of us – by name – and that name belongs to God. God is the true shepherd, the one who knows your name, calls your name, and leads you in and out of the fold. When you feel lost, listen for the voice of the shepherd, calling your name. It might sound like your voice – it might sound like the voice of your mother or father – it might sound like the voice of your true love or your child. Any which way, you’ll know it by its loving sound. It is the True Shepherd that leads us out and back

in, that keeps us safe, that guides our way. And it is the True Shepherd that is the voice not only at the gate of our fold, but the gate of our neighbor, and the gate of our siblings across the whole planet.

May you hear the voice of the Shepherd and may you follow the way the Shepherd leads. May God call you by name, and may you love God so much that names fall away and you are just constantly in the company of God – our Father, the Shepherd, and the Spirit. Amen!