

THE SHEPHERD

John 10:22-30

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on May 12, 2019, the Fourth Sunday of Easter,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.'

I.

As ambivalent as I am on the use of social media, and as detached from its use as I am, I must admit it is great being able to take advantage of technology by going online, and through Google, listen to recordings of voices from events or entertainment in our nation's history that happened during or before my lifetime and that still have the capacity to stir my soul.

In 1964, sitting in the yellow family station wagon in the parking lot of a Mercury dealership in Memphis, while my parents shopped for what was then called "a second car," I listened to the voice of Harry Caray burst forth in a Trinitarian exclamation: "The Cardinals win the pennant! The Cardinals win the pennant! The Cardinals win the pennant!" Though my team allegiances have since shifted, it was the beginning of baseball being a part of my life.

A decade or so later in a large film class in college – for which I and most others had signed up because it was the easiest way to meet an arts requirement – I was mesmerized by the film *Citizen Kane* and intrigued by the final word – "Rosebud" – Charles Foster Kane whispers as his long life comes to an end and by the next frame of a small snow sled – with the name "Rosebud" on it – burning in a bonfire along with many other excess belongings from the attic of Kane's extravagant mansion in which he had lived his final years alone. I was riveted when the professor explained that as a child, Kane had been sledding with that very sled the day he was taken from his home and his mother. It was his search for a lost childhood that fueled Kane's drive, domination, and destructiveness.¹ Charles Foster Kane had become Citizen Kane out of an endless search for the maternal love from which he had been separated as a child, a love for which we are grateful this day if we had it, and mournful if we didn't.

Other lines – voiced in movies – have stayed with me all my life and spoken to different parts of whom I am:

- Marlon Brando's "I coulda' been a contenda' in *On the Waterfront*."²

¹<http://www.wellesnet.com/orson-welles-explains-the-meaning-of-rosebud-in-citizen-kane/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBiewQrpBBA>

- His anguished but not fully repentant cry in *A Streetcar Named Desire*:³ “Stella!”
- And the mysterious voice Kevin Costner as Ray Kinsella hears in a cornfield in Iowa – “If you build it, *he* will come”⁴ – the “he” referring to Shoeless Joe Jackson, a involved in the 1919 World Series Scandal, as well as to Kinsella’s own father, who had written about Jackson, a “he” which, when made plural, was transformed into a theme businesses, churches and organizations all over the world use to this day: “If you build it, *they* will come.”

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I am also moved when technology allows me to hear voices of leaders speaking to our nation during days of challenge, accomplishment, or mourning:

- “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”⁵
- “One small step for man; one great leap for mankind.”⁶
- “...they slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God.”⁷

II.

Once we leave the world of technology, history, and cinema, we can encounter the power of the voice in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

The call of Isaiah the Prophet:

*‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’
‘Here am I; send me!’*⁸

The love poetry in the Song of Songs:

*The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills...*

*The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land.*⁹

*My beloved speaks and says to me:
‘Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.*

³https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBD_enUS846US846&ei=qbrWXKrkjGLLs5gL_86S4CA&q=stella+in+cat+on+a+hot+tin+roof&oq=Stella+in+cat&gs_l=psy-ab.1.0.0i22i30i10.4698.15401..19326..0.0..0.114.1016.11j2.....0....1..gws-wiz.....0i71j35i39j0i131j0i67j35i39i70i251j0i131i67j0i67i70i249j38.axO1ESnapbs

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ay5GqJWHF8>

⁵ <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/>

⁶ <https://www.space.com/17307-neil-armstrong-one-small-step-quote.html>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa7icmqgsow>

⁸ Isaiah 6:8.

⁹ Song of Songs 2:8-12.

And the voice of the risen Christ, speaking to Peter, directly, and through scripture to us, indirectly: “*Follow thou me.*”¹⁰

III.

Throughout the literature of the Bible, there is a link between the power of the *voice* and the omnipresent image of *Shepherd*. The word “shepherd” is used 118 times in the Bible, a fact readily accessible through Google.

- In the Old Testament, shepherds appear early, as in his short scriptural life, Abel is a “keeper of sheep.”¹¹
- Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we see that shepherds can be pastoral, nomadic or settled, wealthy or poor.¹²
- By the time the Book of Genesis ends, God has come to be called “The Shepherd of Israel.”¹³
- Later, the Kings of Israel inherit the title,¹⁴ and are subject to great criticism from the prophets when they are corrupt, faithless, or unjust, which often they often are.¹⁵

By the time the Old Testament draws to a close, the people of Israel have begun to yearn for a Messiah, and at times, that yearning is expressed as yearning for a Shepherd. For example, Isaiah prophesies that the Messiah

*...will feed his flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs in his arms,
And carry them in his bosom,
And gently lead the mother sheep.*¹⁶

In the New Testament, the word “shepherd” appears 26 times, six of which are in the tenth chapter of John, portions of which we just read.

Early in this chapter, Jesus claims the title of “Shepherd” for himself.

‘I am the good shepherd [he says].

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

¹⁰ John 22:21.

¹¹ Genesis 4:2.

¹² John D. Davis, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1929), 709-710.

¹³ Genesis 49:24.

¹⁴ I Samuel 5:2; Ezekiel 34.

¹⁵ Ezekiel 34, and many others.

¹⁶ Isaiah 40:11; echoed in Matthew 2:6.

Jesus then links *Shepherd* with *voice*:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice...

*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.*¹⁷

A strong and rich aspect of the Good Shepherd title Christ claims for himself is *the voice of the Shepherd*:

- *They will listen to my voice*
- *My sheep hear my voice.*
- *I know them, and they follow me.*

IV.

As a preacher, anytime I speak of “hearing the voice of God” or “Christ speaking to us” I know that a number of people will assume and hope that I am speaking symbolically; a number will look down at their bulletins in awkward silence; and a number will say to themselves “God has spoken to me, but if I say anything about it, people might avoid me.” Wherever you fall among these numbers, please stay with me.

A blogger named Debi Thomas posts an essay each Monday morning on the lectionary passage on which many clergy will be preaching the following Sunday. As you might imagine, she gets a lot of traffic! In her essay this past Monday, Thomas writes:

... whatever belief I arrive at in this life will not come from the ups and downs of my own emotional life. It will not come from a creed, a doctrine, or a cleverly worded sermon. Rather it will come from the daily, hourly business of belonging to Jesus's flock — of walking in the footsteps of the Shepherd, living in the company of fellow sheep, and *listening* in real time for the *voice* of the one whose classroom is rocky hills, hidden pastures, and deeply shadowed valleys. If I won't follow him into those...places of both tranquility and treachery, trust and doubt — I will never belong to him at all.

Thomas continues:

Sheep know their shepherd because they are *his*; they walk, graze, feed and sleep in his shadow, beneath his rod and staff, within constant earshot of his *voice*. They believe because they have surrendered to his care, his authority, his leadership, and his guidance. There is no belonging from the outside; Christianity is not a spectator sport. *Belong*, Jesus says. Consent to belong. Belief will follow.

My friends, whether Christ speaks to us through our ears, our hearts, our minds, or our consciences, Christ *speaks*. We hear his voice in whatever ways fit us “in *real* time...in the *classroom* of rocky hills, hidden pastures, deeply shadowed valleys.”

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Thirty-nine years ago, almost to the day, I received my Master of Divinity in the graduation ceremony in the Quad at Union Theological Seminary in New York. I boarded a U-Haul truck the next day and drove across the country to the church in West Texas where I had been called to serve as Associate Pastor for Youth Ministries.

¹⁷ John 10:11-18,

I was able to get there for the final youth fellowship meeting of that school year. When I stepped out of the truck, I stepped into the role of being a Pastor, a role from which I have never been away in the years since.

Three years earlier, at the age of twenty-one, I had entered far too quickly into a marriage I should not have entered. By the time I set foot in West Texas, it had begun to fall apart. Two years later, on Labor Day Weekend, it had formally ended, and I spent the day cleaning the house and getting the yard in shape so the house could be sold and the minimal proceeds divided.

I worked alone and did a lot of thinking. I felt guilt. I felt shame. I felt embarrassment. Divorce was not something that had much place in my moral or Christian frame of reference. I was haunted by the feeling that I would be a minister who would always feel the need to explain why I had failed in this important area of life.

Eight years earlier, at my father's funeral, his partner in the business they had founded selling packaging materials from manufacturers to wholesalers had said to me: "If you ever want to go into the business, give me a call."

That hot, lonely afternoon I thought: "Maybe I should just become a really good layperson in the church, teaching Sunday School, serving on Session, perhaps even making a lot of money and giving it to the church."

I did not have the man's phone number, but knew I could find it through Directory Assistance in Atlanta where he lived. I also knew that he and his family would probably be at their lake house for the holiday weekend, as we had been with them several times when I was a child. So I decided to call and leave a message on the answering machine.

The phone rang, and rang, and rang, and rang.

The answering machine did not pick up.

When I got up the next morning and went to my office at the church, I got busy planning Rally Day, the Youth Kickoff, the upcoming middle school retreat. I attended a staff meeting. I made a hospital visit.

Late in the day, I realized I hadn't tried to call again.

I have long come to believe that in the silence of the unplugged answering machine, in the silence of the unanswered call, the *voice of the Shepherd* was speaking to me.

It never occurred to me to call again.