

So as many of us know, we are “Easter People” and as such, every day to us is Easter. We tend to lose sight of that throughout the year and so during the season of Lent we get an infusion of what it means to be “Easter People.” We sing the hymns and speak the language of resurrection. We proclaim the “Alleluia’s” that will never run out. Our praise is filled with words describing the risen Christ as exalted, Christ is King, and God is Lord over all the earth! We rejoice in God’s great victory over sin and death. A victory over the laws of nature if we really think about it. We use the language of power. We use the language of majesty. We use the language of glory. “Sing, O heavens, and earth reply,” we sing. “Alleluia!” /

Which brings us to today, a day when the earth does reply. Today we sing and speak, not of the heavens, but of the earth. Today, our worship contains images, not of thrones and dominions, but of green pastures, of still waters, dark valleys, and meandering paths. Today we say the praises not about a monarch, but about a shepherd. / (1)

There is no one more earthy and grounded than a shepherd, especially the kind of shepherd that roamed the hills of Judea in the first century. We may imagine shepherds lounging on soft hillocks, playing sweet tunes on their pipes or harps, and no doubt, some shepherds were probably musical. The writer of our psalm comes to mind. But the work of a shepherd was hard, and it was rough. It required strength and endurance for lengthy excursions over rough terrain. It required skill at fighting, using the staff to keep predators away from the flock. Wolves, lions, and thieves. It required a willingness to forego the creature comforts of even a very modest home, for a life lived largely in the outdoors. The work of a shepherd required vigilance. The flock was everything. Every sheep, every lamb, worth the sacrifice. /

“I am the Good Shepherd,” Jesus says, “I know my own, and my own know me. They will listen to my voice.” There is a powerful bond between the shepherd and the sheep, and Jesus is claiming just this kind of bond with his beloved people. (pause) /

I grew up on the wide-open plains of Kansas, so sheep are somewhat foreign to me. Cows and sometimes pigs were the animal (2)

of choice back then. Neil Tolman shares the following on the subject of sheep shedding some light on it for us. He writes:

“I grew up in Navajo sheep country. I spent my 16th summer out on the arid reservation at my friend's grandparent's sheep compound. My friend was the only one besides me for 20 miles that spoke English. I spent most of the summer quietly watching and was inundated with the culture. /

In my mind's eye I can clearly see and hear the sound of Roger's little old Navajo grandmother coming out of her log and stone hogan singing to her sheep. As she hobbled out toward the corral the sheep raised their heads and began to anticipate the opening of the gate and the cool water that she would provide. Grandma waited patiently while the sheep drank their fill. Only after they were well watered did she slowly start down the canyon softly chanting in Navajo a song that spoke of her love for the sheep. /

As she led the way the 200+ sheep eagerly fell in behind and around her. It was quite a sight to watch grandma's bright green velvet shirt bobbing down the canyon surrounded by waves of white wool. (3)

At the bottom of the canyon, she paused and sat on a smooth rock in the early morning shade of the sandstone cliffs. The sheep began feeding on the sparse green plants growing in the desert shade. Periodically, throughout the day Grandma got up and sang as she walked to another area where the sheep would feed again. Toward dusk she would sing the sheep back home. They eagerly followed her to the corral where they were safe from marauding coyotes through the night.” (pause) /

The sheep know their shepherd’s voice. How does that translate for us? How well do we know God’s voice? In Exodus, Moses, also shepherded a flock. His attention is grabbed by something extraordinary, a bush that is burning, which never burns up. As he gazes on it, he hears the voice of God. It’s unmistakable, clear. /

“Moses, Moses!” the voice calls, and Moses answers, “Here I am, Lord.” “Stop right there,” God says, “and take off your sandals: you are standing on holy ground.” And God proceeds to give Moses some startling and not entirely welcome instructions as to what God wants him to do next. / (4)

How does Moses know this is the voice of God? Well one clue is probably that burning bush, something defying the laws of nature. But that could be a hallucination. Ebenezer Scrooge might suggest, a bit of undigested beef, but we are working with sheep today. All we know, from the reading is he *knows*. And, anyway, Moses is a special case when it comes to hearing God's voice. Scripture tells us that he is unusual in the "face-to-face" way he speaks with God. In fact, there is no one else, in all the bible, not even Jesus, who is described as speaking to God in that way. Certainly, most of us do not have that experience. In fact, when we hear about people who claim they have that experience, we tend to want to get them medical help, and quickly. /

Still, scripture tells us that we should listen for God's voice, and then it offers us an abundance of options as to just how we might do that. Jesus goes away to pray. Jacob lies down and has a dream. We can listen for God's voice in our prayer or in our dreams. God is also known to speak to us through the voices of other people. We can watch out for those moments when we can't shake something someone has said to us. When we wonder whether it just might have been God trying (5)

to get through. Some people have described a great trauma in their life as the moment when they were most able to hear the voice of God. And God can certainly speak to us through the news of the day, stir our hearts to prayer, our hands to action, or both. (pause) /

The prophet Elijah is also a guide for us. In 1 Kings, Elijah is on the run because Queen Jezebel has put a price on his head. He has just, personally, killed 400 prophets of her gods, Ba'al and Asherah. Elijah runs, traveling 40 days and 40 nights when finally, he comes to Mount Horeb, where he finds a cave. There, God gives Elijah the instruction that he should stand at the mouth of the cave until God passes by. /

1 Kings 19:11-12, "Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence" (pause) /

To hear the voice of God clearly, Elijah's story suggests, we figure out how to open a space for the sound of sheer silence in our lives. I (6)

think that can be challenging for us, but I can tell you, once we begin, we can grow to long for silence. God loves us and longs for our love in return. So, God will find a way to get our attention, whether that means tapping us on the shoulder, bopping us over the head, or setting shrubbery on fire. But in silence we have the chance to meet God.

(pause) /

The care of the shepherd offers us yet another way. Let's return to Neil's story of life in Navajo country when he was 16:

“One day grandma had to make the long trip into town. My friend and I were asked to take the sheep out for the day. What an education I got. The sheep were not cooperative. We had to drive (push) them to where we wanted them. Without the help of the dogs, we would have never moved them away from the water. During the day we spent a lot of time running after stragglers. The sheep never did settle into grazing, and we had to constantly watch to keep them together. Come late afternoon we struggled to get the sheep into the corral because they were still hungry and unsettled. / (7)

Later that night as we tiredly sat near the fire eating supper, I asked Grandma why the sheep would not follow us. She laughed knowingly and explained through my friend's interpretation that she was there when each of those many sheep were born. She sang to them as they were cleaned by their mothers. She went on to say that she was the one that had put their mouth to their mother's milk the first time. When the mothers were birthing, she had stroked their heads and comforted them. And then she said: 'They are my children, and they know me.' Then she paused and looked at me and asked: 'Have you never heard the story of Jesus?'" (pause) /

////// Grandma has been a strong presence with her sheep at every moment of their lives. She is the one who soothes the mothers while they labor. She is the one who helps the newborn lambs nurse. She is the one who sings to them while their mothers tend them. Grandma the shepherd is a beautiful image of the God who tenderly cares for us, the God whose voice, when we hear it, will be unmistakable. /

Every year during the Easter season we sing the hymns and speak the language of resurrection. We sing and speak of God's great (8)



victory over sin and death, victory over the laws of nature. We use the language of power, and majesty, and glory. /

But on this day of our Easter celebrations, we sing and speak, not of the heavens, but of the earth. Today we speak, not about a king who is removed and remote, but about a shepherd, who is the king of love. We remember the God who leads us to places of rest and nurture, who leads us to havens of stillness and peace. We draw near to the God who comes close to us when we are trembling with fear, and who never leaves us alone in that dark valley, but who guides us through it. This is the day when we rest in the care of the God who not only restores our bodies and our souls with goodness and kindness, but who leads us on the right path, who leads us ever homeward. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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