

April 26, 2026
Easter 4, Year A
The Rev. Jack Alvey

"You Are His"

"The sheep follow him because they know his voice."

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I invite you to wonder, what voice seems to be getting most of your attention these days? Think about this past week.

What were the voices on the radio trying to tell you? How about the billboards on the interstate? What were the YouTube ads trying to sell? What about your social media ads? What are they all trying to say to you?

In one way or another, these voices are saying, if you buy this or subscribe to this, your life will be complete, the hole inside you will be filled. The problem, however, is that the hole inside of us has an insatiable appetite. At best, these goods and services fill the hole on a temporary basis.

Most of us recognize the subtext of these voices. We aren't completely oblivious to their true intent. Underneath them all we hear a similar promise. If you have this then you will be satisfied, and only at 5 easy installments of \$499.99.

The cost, of course, isn't just money. They cost our attention, our time, even our peace. These voices promise that more of whatever we perceive we lack will finally give us peace. Ironically, the opposite is true.

The more we have, the more we have to protect, and the more anxious we become about losing it. Ultimately, striving for more costs us the peace of knowing that we already have enough. These voices promise everything and take from us instead. They steal our joy. In today's lesson, Jesus calls voices like that thieves.

The good news is that there is another voice, a more compelling voice, a voice that has our best interest at heart, a voice that tells us what we need to hear – not what we want to hear. Those other voices don't have our hearts in mind. This one does.

This is the voice of our Good Shepherd who calls us each by name. The shepherd isn't after what we can give him. Instead, he wants to give us abundant life. And it costs him his own.

The life the shepherd promises is remarkably different than the life the other voices promise.

The other voices promise life with bigger and better. A bigger house, a bigger car, a bigger paycheck, a better life. And there's something in us that wants to believe them because bigger is better, right? But we're not talking about Texas. We're talking about the kingdom of heaven.

The abundant life Jesus offers is bigger and better but not in the way we've been trained to imagine bigger and better. Not bigger and better like Costco or Buc-ee's.

The kingdom of heaven means bigger and better in a different direction – not taller and wider, but deeper and fuller. Left unchecked, the world spreads us thin and leaves us lifeless. The kingdom of heaven, on the other hand, makes us better and gives us abundant life.

Life in the kingdom of heaven can fill that insatiable hole inside us. Not because it gives us more. Because it gives us Jesus. It gives us the one who knows us and calls us each by name.

The other voices don't really know us. They know our demographics. They know our zip code and our income bracket. But they don't know us. They don't know who we are right here — in our heart of hearts.

The Good Shepherd knows us fully. Not by what we can give him or by what we can do for him. He knows us by name. He knows us here, in our heart. And he wants us to know that we are fully seen and loved.

The shepherd knows your grief and sorrow. He knows your joy. He knows your hopes and dreams. He knows the thing you still can't forgive yourself for. He knows you. Every part of you. And yet, he still wants you. He still calls you by name. You are his.

Over these last three weeks of Easter, we have been listening to stories of the risen Christ showing up to make himself known to his followers. He does so in a very personal way.

On Easter morning, the Good Shepherd met Mary in a garden when she was weeping and blinded by her tears. He said one word. Her name. “Mary.” Instantly, she knew him and she knew she was known.

On Easter 2, our shepherd stood in a locked room with Thomas, who was alone in his doubts. Jesus said to him, “Put your finger here. Do not doubt, but believe.” And he believed. He was no longer alone.

On Easter 3, the shepherd walked the road to Emmaus with two disciples who were grieving and confused. He opened the Scriptures to them, and then he broke the bread, and their eyes were opened. They finally saw that he had been with them all along.

Notice that the risen Christ does not speak to the crowds. He doesn't send a mass email. He speaks to individuals. He meets them where they are. He makes a home visit. He keeps a dinner appointment. He didn't want just anyone. He wanted them.

This is the same shepherd whose voice calls you today. He doesn't just want anyone. He wants you. And he lays down his life and takes it up again so that you will know this truth – in your heart of hearts.

So how do we actually learn to hear his voice and trust this voice when the other voices are trying to convince us bigger is better?

Some of you know my life right now is Youth Baseball. So, I can't help but give a baseball analogy. You can't step into the batter's box and expect to hit the ball because you watched a YouTube video. You have to take reps. You have to see pitches over and over again.

I know practice isn't always fun. But the game isn't really that fun when you're lost out there, when the ball is coming at you and you don't know what to do with it once you've fielded it, if you've managed to field it at all.

In practice, you get to think about these things again and again. You get to make mistakes without consequences. You learn. But the game happens at game speed. The pitch is coming whether you are ready or not. Do you have the confidence in what you've learned? Will you trust the voice of your coach?

Faith is like that. As you all know, life happens at game speed. The diagnosis, the phone call, the grief comes out of left field. In those moments, we don't have time to think our way into recognizing the shepherd's voice.

We recognize the shepherd's voice the way we learn anything – by repetition. By showing up. By spending time in the places where he speaks until hearing his voice becomes second nature.

That is why we come here week after week. Not because we are earning anything. Not because church is going to fix all our problems. We come because this is practice. Church helps us be better prepared for the game of life.

Church is where the shepherd's voice is spoken aloud through the scriptures, in the prayers, over the font, at the table. This is where he feeds us again and again with the food that fills that hole we long to fill, with food that promises abundant life. This is where we learn to recognize his voice when life comes at us at game speed.

Church isn't always fun. But life isn't much fun when you can't recognize the shepherd's voice in it. If our lives aren't centered around the voice of our Good Shepherd, then at some

point we'll wander off thinking we can do it all by ourselves – until we find ourselves stuck. But even then, the Good Shepherd will not abandon us. He will leave the 99 to find the one.

Jesus says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” This gate isn't simply to provide a safe place from an often-hostile world. This gate provides a way for you to come to be seen and known, to be greeted and loved.

So come in through the gate. Come to this table, where the shepherd's voice will say your name and give you the confidence to trust him out there.

And then go out. Go out into a world full of voices competing for your attention — a world of radio ads and billboards and thieves. Go out knowing that you have heard a different voice - a voice that knows you, wants you, and calls you by name.

And if you wander, better yet, when you wander, the Good Shepherd will come for you. And find you. He will speak your name until you know you are fully known and loved. Follow the Good Shepherd because that is the voice of the one who truly loves you. Amen.