

“Hearing the Shepherd’s Voice”  
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Bruton Parish – Williamsburg, VA  
Easter 4, April 26, 2026  
Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

My children call me Amma. Every time I leave the room for more than about two minutes, my four-year-old son Jaxtyn calls out, “Amma. Where are you?” He wants to know that I’m close, and if he can’t sense my presence, he starts looking for me. He would prefer that I never be out of his sight, but of course, that’s not possible. If I don’t come back in the room quickly enough, he seeks me out, and if he can’t find me immediately, he starts crying. When he was born, he spent 5 weeks in the NICU by himself, and I can’t help but wonder if that is the source of his distress when I’m not available. I think he wants to be reassured that I haven’t left him, that I’m not going to leave him. Sometimes I get frustrated because I want to be able to change over the laundry or feed the cats or have a few moments to myself without needing to account for my presence at every moment.

But when I think about it, Jaxtyn’s response is not so different from ours when we want assurance that God is there for us. We want to know that God is listening, that God hears our cries, that God will come for us when we call. We are not unlike sheep milling around in a pen, waiting for the shepherd to come.

In Jesus’ time, sometimes shepherds kept their flocks together in the same pen over night for safety. Each shepherd KNEW their sheep, gave them names, and called them by name. After a night spent mixed up with the sheep of other flocks, when morning came, the sheep would recognize the voice of their shepherd at the gate, calling them by name, gathering them together to head out to graze. They knew their shepherd’s voice and would only follow the voice of their shepherd.

In the Gospel of John, the phrase “know his voice” does not mean simply recognize; it implies a deep bond, attachment and connection.”<sup>1</sup> The sheep and the shepherd spend a lot of time together, and the sheep trust the shepherd to protect them, guide them, lead them to good pastures, and find them if they should become lost. A good shepherd will do all those things.

Jesus tells this story about sheep and shepherds and gates shortly after he has healed a man who was born blind, something that no one had done before and that only a man from God could do. But the Pharisees didn’t recognize Jesus for who he was. They condemned him because he had healed the man on the Sabbath, and they drove the man who had been born blind out of the synagogue.

When Jesus says that he is the gate for the sheep and that he has come that they might have life and have it abundantly, he’s comparing himself to the Pharisees as well as to many of those who came before him who were not good leaders.

If the Pharisees were watching over the Jewish people, they were doing a pretty bad job.

Instead of rejoicing with one of their flock who had been healed, they removed him from their community.

Instead of recognizing the one who had done the miracle, they were throwing out anyone who called Jesus Messiah.

Instead of helping the people find abundant life in God and supporting them when they did, they were taking away life and joy.

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<sup>1</sup> David Ewart, <https://www.holytextures.com/2023/02/john-10-1-10-year-a-easter-4-sermon.html>

Bad shepherds. No wonder Jesus compares them to thieves and bandits who try to bypass the rightful gate and slip in to steal the sheep. They weren't protecting their flock. If anything, by trying to turn the people against Jesus, they were like the thieves trying to take the sheep from their rightful shepherd.

In Jesus' story, it was the Pharisees who were leading the people astray, but I wonder if they had been led astray themselves. Generally speaking, I don't think they were trying to do the wrong thing. I wonder if they couldn't discern the right voice to follow, and there were many voices calling, including the voices of fear, greed, pride, and self-righteousness.

What if they had recognized Jesus' voice...

What if they had trusted and followed him instead of following the false voices...

What if they had wanted abundant life for themselves and those who followed them...

Well, we'd be telling a different story today.

And the story of good and bad shepherds applies just as much today. Bishop Jake Owensby wrote in his reflection this week on the Gospel, "not every voice we hear can be trusted to lead us to the kind of life we truly desire. We are always being addressed by many voices. The question is not whether we will hear a voice, but whose voice we will learn to trust and follow."<sup>2</sup>

How do we choose amongst all the competing voices we hear?

How do we discern the voice of Jesus?

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<sup>2</sup> Jake Owensby, <https://jakeowensby.substack.com/p/the-voice-we-learn-to-trust>

How do we come to know and trust the voice of our good shepherd, no matter what life circumstances we may be encountering?

Y'all know I'm a "how" girl, I always want to know "how" things are going to happen, and in this case I think practicing prayer is the answer to how. On Thursday I had the joy of talking with a parishioner about prayer. We talked about prayer being a conversation with God in which sometimes we're doing the talking and sometimes we're doing the listening. We talked about how there are as many ways to pray as there are individuals on the planet. Whether it's contemplative prayer or meditating on scripture, journaling, interceding on behalf of others, coloring, singing, running, gardening, spending time in creation, walking a labyrinth, gazing at icons or art, serving others, or any other form, prayer is something we can do anytime anywhere.

I believe that our practices of prayer, whatever form they take, help us to discern whose voice we're hearing. By spending time with Jesus, sharing what's in our hearts and listening for his voice, we develop trust in him. Through our practice we form a deeper bond with him, we learn to recognize his voice from among many competing voices.

I used to think that prayer was about getting it right, about doing it a particular way or having a particular experience. I might have thought that I would become a calm, centered, wise person through prayer, able to handle everything with grace, even children waking me up at 3am. Over the years, I've come to believe that the practice of prayer is not about practicing to do it more perfectly but about the way that it changes us and becomes our habit, our go to. When we spend time in prayer, we can't help but develop trust in God.

I could go on and on about prayer and its importance, but I'm going to leave you with a prayer practice that Bishop Jake included on his post about our readings.

Prayer Practice:

Set aside some time to sit in a quiet place.

Begin by listening to what is already moving through your mind. What voices are speaking? Pressure, worry, self-criticism, striving? Don't argue with them. Just notice.

Now turn your attention to Jesus. Read this phrase slowly. First out loud, then quietly:

“He calls his own sheep by name.” (John 10:3)

Sit with that for a few moments. Let a word or phrase stand out to you. If your mind wanders, gently return to the words.

After a few minutes, ask yourself: Which of the voices I've heard today sounds like this one?

End with this prayer:

Jesus, you know us and call us by name. Teach us to listen for your voice in our hearts and to trust where you lead. Amen.

My prayer for my son Jaxtyn is that as he grows in life and faith, he will come to trust that I will be there for him, even if he can't always hear my voice, and my prayer for each of us is that as we continue to grow in life and faith, we will come to trust in the voice of our Good Shepherd, knowing that he calls us each by name, knowing that he leads us even through the valley of the shadow of death, and that he came that we might have life and might have it more abundantly.