

“The Voice”

Introduction: As you may well know, *The Voice* is a reality TV that came on the scene about four years ago. Specifically, it is a singing competition which seeks to find new talent drawn from public auditions. One of the distinct features of the competition is the opening "Blind Audition" through which coaches form their team of singers who they then mentor through the remainder of the season. At this blind audition, the coaches' chairs are faced towards the audience and their backs toward the contestants. When they hear a voice that captivates them, or think has potential, they press a button which turns their chair towards the artist and illuminates the bottom of the chair to read "I want you." In that voice, they hope that they have found a winner.

In many ways, we are like those coaches. We go through life hearing a multitude of voices. They range from the voice of our parents, to that of our spouses, our teachers, our bosses, various newscasters and columnists, politicians and preachers . . . the list is almost endless. Which ones do we want? Which ones should we be listening to? Which ones will lead us to life? Sometimes these voices are winners and sometimes not. To be honest, sometimes, without meaning too, even the voices of people who love us can give us bad advice. And sometimes there are just voices that simply seek to lead us down the wrong path. The question is, is there a voice that we can always count on, everyday, in every way, a voice that will always be a winner, a voice that will lead us to live the life that is truly life?

Indeed, there is. As we move on in the gospel of John, we hear Jesus make these claims: “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. . . the sheep listen to his voice. . . I am the good shepherd. . . I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” So let’s begin to unpack these statements by first looking at the big picture of the God who speaks.

I. The God Who Speaks in Jesus

A. Broadly, one of the incredible claims of the biblical record is that the God who has created the universe has chosen to speak to us. As the writer of Hebrews explains it, “In the past” (the days of the OT), “God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days” (since the arrival of Jesus) “he has spoken to us by his Son” (He. 1:1-2). This Son, Jesus, says that if we hear his words and put them into practice we will be like those who build the foundation of our lives on the solid foundation of rock (Ma. 7:24f). Throughout the gospel of John, the voice of Jesus is associated with life. For instance, as Jesus says: “The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life” (6:63). A bit later in our chapter Jesus will say, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life” (vv. 27f). The voice of Jesus is both powerful, calling a man named Lazarus out from death (11:43), and tender, simply speaking a name, “Mary” to a distraught woman as he met her outside of his tomb (20:16). In another of John’s writings, the vision and letter known as The Revelation, Jesus invites the church to listen to his voice:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them and they with me. . . Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. [Rev. 3:20, 22]

B. The voice of Jesus, in other words, as he speaks to us through the external word of Scripture and the inner promptings of the Spirit, is associated with life, with bringing clarity and meaning and direction and sweet fellowship with God into our lives. It is to help us understand who we are and who we are called to be. It is to help us live with courage and grace in this broken world. But the fact of the matter is that there are many competing voices, voices that are false and do not lead to life but to dead ends, destruction, and even death. This is the context into which

Jesus was speaking in John 10. It was the context of a Jewish Feast called Dedication (v. 23).

II. The Context of Hanukkah and False Shepherds

A. As we've seen in past chapters, Jesus has acted and spoken on the Sabbath, and at the feasts of Passover and Tabernacles. Each time he has taken an aspect of that event and used it to reveal something more of his glory, of his beauty, and of his mission. Now, as the implications of the healing of the man born blind are still lingering (from chapter 9), some weeks later, in the hearts and minds of his followers and the crowds, we see him preparing to celebrate the Feast of Dedication. The Hebrew word for this feast is one we've all heard – it's Hanukkah, which means dedication. As we learn about it we find that Hanukkah celebrates, warns, and promises.

B. It celebrates that in 165 B.C., a Jewish leader with the great name of Judas Maccabeus, freed the Temple in Jerusalem from the control of the Greeks, who had taken over God's holy place following the conquest by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. Not only had the growing Greek influence caused many Jews to compromise their faith and practice as the years went on, but the temple was desecrated by Greek soldiers with pig's blood, the erecting of idols, and the burning of scrolls. Judas Maccabeus led the effort to liberate the temple and he rededicated it to the Lord. Hanukkah, "dedication," became the name of the annual festival that celebrates this liberation.

C. But the festival also served as a warning. It became a time when God's people asked themselves hard questions about false shepherds, a metaphor used to describe leaders and kings. In particular, how had God's leaders allowed the Greek influence to take over and sway the people? And, why had the people listened to those voices? To this end, a significant piece of the liturgy of this festival came from Ezekiel 34. Here is how it reads:

The word of the LORD came to me [the prophet Ezekiel]: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. . . I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. . .

Pretty strong stuff to be sure. Coming from the days of the exile, these words were now being applied to a situation in which the leaders of Israel had again failed her people. It became a warning to people in all times to be aware of false voices.

D. But within this warning is also an incredible promise:

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land." [Ez. 34:1-13]

It's the promise that God himself will come to lead, to shepherd, his people. And so, just as Jesus had used Passover to talk about being bread that sustains us, and Tabernacles to talk about his providing the water that quenches our thirst and the light that guides us, so now we see him using

the celebration and warning of Hanukkah to speak about how he has fulfilled the promise. He is the shepherd who was to come and rescue and gather God's people. He is the good shepherd. He is the true king. Listening to and responding to his voice is what will bring us life.

III. The Voice, and Life, of the Good Shepherd

A. To emphasize this point, Jesus asks his listeners to picture what would have been present in every first century village and town. Each would have had a public space, large enough to hold several flocks of sheep. The gate to this walled space would have been guarded by a watchman whose duty it was to protect the sheep at night and let in the rightful shepherds the next day. Each would call their sheep, by voice or small flute, and lead them out to find pasture.

Illustration: I read a fascinating illustration of this in modern day Palestine. During an uprising in the late 1980's, the Israeli army decided to punish a Palestinian village near Bethlehem for refusing to pay taxes, taxes which the village claimed were being used to support the Israeli occupation. The officer in command rounded up all the animals in the village and placed them in a large barbed-wire pen. A few days later, he was approached by a woman who begged him to release her flock. She argued that since her husband had died, the animals were her only source of livelihood. The officer laughed and pointed to the pen which now contained hundreds of animals and said it would be impossible to find hers. She asked that if she could in fact separate them herself, would he be willing to let her take them home. He agreed. So the soldier opened the gate and the woman's son took out a small flute and began to play. Soon, sheep heads began to pop up across the pen and the 25 sheep that recognized the tune followed the boy and his mother home.

We don't have sheep pens in our villages and towns, but we do have parking lots! Ever have trouble finding your car because you can't remember where you parked? All you need to do is push the button on your remote starter and your car will come to life. That car recognizes the voice of your key, and won't come to life for any other!

B. Jesus is the voice that, if we recognize and follow it, brings us to life. How can we be sure? How can we trust that he is the voice to which we should listen? We can be sure because as Jesus goes on to push the images of his opening parable around a bit, he identifies himself as the gate for the sheep. This is significant because in many ancient sheepfolds, it would be the shepherd himself who would lie down at night in the gateway to prevent the sheep from getting out and any predators from getting in. Rather than running away when trouble came, the good shepherd who is Jesus would even give up his life for the safety and protection of his sheep. The phrase "over my dead body" takes on new meaning with this picture! This is a shepherd who, in distinction to the false shepherds, does not look out for his own interests. His entire priority, no questions asked, is the sheep.

C. Even more, Jesus promises not only to willingly and voluntarily give up his life for us, he promises "to take it up again" (v. 17). This points, obliquely to be sure, to the resurrection. It reveals that the resurrection is not some afterthought where the Father is forced to rescue his Son from an unexpected tragedy. It points instead to the plan of the Father and the Son, intimately united, in purpose. The death of Jesus was with the resurrection in view. And then his resurrection led to his ascension which resulted in the pouring out of the Spirit so that we might hear his voice, and live. Death has been defeated and eternal life has begun. No other voice can claim that. The voice of this shepherd is the voice of the true king. It is the voice we always count on and trust.

And so here's the bottom line: We cannot begin to know this voice, and distinguish it from all others, we cannot follow it and let it lead us to life unless we are men and women of the Scripture. We must feed on this word from God daily so that the contours of our hearts and minds become informed and shaped by it, so that we can hear the Good Shepherd call us by name, and so that we can recognize in increasing measure the life that is truly life. God has spoken through his Son. Let us come to his word so that we can listen, and have him lead us.

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