

Sermon John 10: 11-17

“The Voices We Know”

4th Easter

May 11th, 2025

As today is Mothers’ Day, and I would like to invite you to think about your mother for a moment.

It was interesting to watch you as you were thinking about your moms – most of you seemed to light up, I saw smiles. Some looked thoughtful or sad. But I also saw some more reserved expressions. And that’s to be expected. Yes, many have great memories of their mothers – but then of course a relationship with our mother can be complicated or downright difficult. Some may not even really know their mother because they lost her at a very early age.

So I want to acknowledge that for some this day – Mothers’ Day – may be bittersweet. Or maybe just bitter.

I, for one, am grateful for my mother. I’m grateful that she’s still alive. We have a good relationship. And one of the reasons why I wanted to move to NY from California was to be closer to Germany and to my mom – for who knows how many years together we have left?

Now whether or not you have or had a good relationship with your mother, whether or not you have or had a relationship with your mother at all - your mother carried you in her womb and gave birth to you. One of the very first things you heard while still in her womb was her heartbeat – and her voice; and that happened when you were about 16 weeks old in utero, that’s when your hearing developed.

In fact, your mother’s heartbeat gave you a sense for rhythm and has a lot to do with the fact that you like music, which is based on rhythm.

And hearing your mother’s voice gave you something to connect with and relate to her beyond the womb. We know our mother’s voice from the very start, and we are soothed by it.

And we will always remember what mom sounds like. A couple of years ago, my daughter, after she attended one of my choir concerts, claimed that she could hear my voice - which seemed impossible, since I was but one of about 60 singers, and

I am definitely not a star soprano. But she said, ‘Mom, I am so used to your voice, I just know it! I hear you.’

Just take a moment and think about your mom’s voice.

And now think about all the words she spoke to you. If your mom is or was anything like mine, there were probably times when she comforted you, when she encouraged you, when she was tender with you, when she was silly with you. Then there were times she probably gave you some good advice, when she taught you about life. And then there were probably times when she scolded you or even verbally lashed out at you in anger or frustration or fear. I got into quite a bit of mischief when I was a kid and did many stupid things, and of course my mom would raise her voice and set me straight.

And though I didn’t like it when my mom scolded me, and even though at times didn’t want to listen to her, I always eventually came around realizing that my mother was harsh with me because she loved me. And especially when I became a mom myself, I realized that motherly love sometimes means tough love. We don’t do our kids a favor if we don’t set them straight once in a while or warn them about dangers, if we don’t challenge them to become the best they can be.

Today, we don’t just observe Mothers’ Day, but also ‘Shepherd Sunday’. According to our church lectionary, Shepherd Sunday always is celebrated on the 4th Sunday in Easter, which, this year, happens to fall on Mother’s Day. We prayed with the beautiful words of Psalm 23, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.’ And in the gospel lesson from John, we heard Jesus talk about God, and of himself, as a good shepherd – that’s an image we are very familiar with.

Now the very first thing a sheep in utero hears is their mother’s voice. And immediately after a lamb is born, it is able to recognize its mothers’ voice among all those other baaing voices in the flock.

But since domesticated sheep are tended and herded, they have to listen to the shepherd’s voice as well. And how does that work? There are still shepherds in the world today, like in many places in Africa, who tend their sheep pretty much in the same way shepherds tended their sheep in Jesus’ days. Usually each flock is tended separately, but sometimes the flocks mingle, for example when their shepherds lead them to a water hole to drink. Then it’s sheep mayhem! How do the sheep know which shepherd to follow once they’re done? Well, they indeed follow their shepherd’s voice; every shepherd has a very distinct call for his or her flock,

something like ‘ayayay’ – something the sheep recognize. And it works! The sheep know their shepherd’s voice, and they follow.

So Jesus is not just making something up, but is drawing on life experiences of his audience when he is talking about sheep knowing their shepherd’s voice. But in the context of today’s gospel lesson, Jesus’ words are actually quite challenging. Here Jesus is responding to the question: are you the Messiah? Are you the one we should follow? And instead of giving a straightforward answer, Jesus says: well, you oughta know that I am the one. For the sheep know their shepherd’s voice. I and the Father are one. And God wants the best for you: eternal life, life to the fullest. That’s what I want for you, and if you had listened to anything I said, you’d know.

God is our Father, God is our Mother, God is our parent, God is our shepherd who wants the best for us and who loves us in ways we cannot even imagine. And God is still speaking to us, all the time: through the Scriptures, through sermons and hymns, through unexpected voices in our head and in our heart, sometimes through the words and deeds of people around us – familiar people and strangers alike. *Sometimes* I know God’s voice when I hear it.

But then, of course, there are moments when I am not certain about whose voice I am hearing. There are many who speak in the name of God and claim to proclaim God’s will. In fact, there are many opposing voices who claim to speak in the name of God. One group gets to pray in the rotunda of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. - another one gets arrested.

There are so many voices we hear in this world today, aided by the mass media and the internet. How can we distinguish God’s true voice in all that?

To know God’s voice, to remember God’s voice unfortunately is not quite as easy as to know and remember our mother’s voice – it’s not as easy as it is for a sheep to recognize the very distinctive call of their shepherd.

No, when listening for God, we don’t only have to listen with our ears, but discern in our hearts as well; sometimes we even need to wrestle with what we hear. I want to share some of my criteria as I am discerning if it’s really God’s voice I am hearing:

Is it a voice that sometimes challenges me and maybe even annoys me, just like my mother’s voice and words sometimes challenged and annoyed me? For I know that God is love, and true love challenges us to be the best we can be.

Is it a voice that is full of grace? A voice that encourages forgiveness? Is it a voice that proclaims life, eternal life, life to the fullest, for all? For God so loved the *world*, we hear in another chapter in the gospel according to John, so it's not just about my personal salvation, but the salvation of the world.

Is it a voice that speaks against division, contempt, hatred, indifference, easy answers, and violence? Is it the voice we hear again and again through the Scriptures - the voice of Christ who calls us to love one another, forgive one another, and help each other carry our burdens so that life to the fullest becomes a reality – not just for a lucky few, but for all?

My prayer for us and for all is that we are somehow able to hear God's voice, the voice of our loving parent, as we are surrounded by all the voices and noises around us that distract us and lead us astray. May prayer for us and all us that we follow God's voice, the voice of our loving parent, on the ways that lead to life rather than the ways of death. Amen