

“A Familiar Voice”

John 10: 22-30

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Our account this morning takes place at the Feast of the Dedication (or what is more commonly known as “Hanukkah”), an eight-day religious festival in Jerusalem that celebrated the purification and rededication of Solomon’s Temple after it had been defiled by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes in the year 165 B.C. After a terrible time of murder and slaughter, and defilement of the temple courts such as the sacrificing of pigs on the sacred altar, Judas Maccabeus and his sons drove out the Syrians, reclaimed the temple for the Lord, and dedicated it anew. And so this feast was a constant hope to the Jewish people that as Jewish liberators freed Jerusalem and removed the heathen altar that had been set up there almost two hundred years earlier, so TOO would come the day when the ROMANS THEMSELVES would be evicted from their midst.

Now while our Lord was walking in the Temple, in the portico of Solomon, we are told that the Jews closed in on him. It seems they were highly suspicious of Jesus, perhaps remembering the time he drove the money changers and sellers of animals out of it declaring, “Make not my Father’s house a house of trade.” They ask him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, then tell us plainly.” Of course they weren’t the slightest bit interested in any words of truth he might have to say; they were merely looking for ammunition they could use against him. Keep in mind that when the Jewish leaders argued before Pilate that Jesus should be put to death the night before his crucifixion, they said he had declared that he could tear down this temple, a building that had taken years and many thousands of workers to construct, and rebuild it in a mere three days. Of course he was talking about his BODY and how in three days, he would be raised up from the dead and NOT referring to the Great Temple, the center of their worship and religious life. What’s interesting is that that comment made by Christ was made very early on in his ministry, but it was remembered and used against him at his trial, three and a half years later. Thus it seemed that the Jews were always trying to trap Jesus into saying things that they could eventually use against him so that he might be arrested and even killed if it came to that.

Refusing to play this game with them, Jesus answers: “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE, AND I KNOW THEM, AND THEY FOLLOW ME; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” This morning, I want to concentrate on one particular verse- v.27 where he says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” The sheep who belong to a particular shepherd hear his voice and respond to it, but those who belong to a DIFFERENT shepherd—like the Jews who confronted Jesus here--do not. If they had been part of his flock, they would have listened to his voice and taken to heart his words and then obeyed them instead of trying to

subvert him and his mission. Hence, how are we able to separate the voice of the Good Shepherd--the Word of the Lord--apart from all the other voices and words that distract us and compete for our attention? And what does that voice say when it calls to us? These are two of the most important questions we as Christians can ever ask.

To begin with, faith and hearing are integrally related- they cannot be separated. Listen to just some of what the Bible says about this relationship: “This is my beloved Son...listen to him” (Matt. 17:5); “Blessed...are those who hear the word of God” (Luke 11:28); “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 14:35); “The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25); and “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

For John, “hearing” is ESPECIALLY significant for he opens his gospel, saying, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” God speaks the Word--the Word representing the very power and will and desire of the Father--and when the Word goes forth, it is with the expectation that it will be heard and obeyed. We tend to think of the word as something written, but before they were written down there was an oral tradition comprised of stories passed along by word-of-mouth, intended to be HEARD rather than read.

The problem however is that we are continuously inundated with words of all kinds- too MANY words; our senses are under assault with constant blathering. Day after day, our televisions are dominated by talking heads who love to generate heat while offering very little light. They speak voluminously while saying nothing, and offer sound bites in place of real substance. Our radios and newspapers are awash with ads and opinions devoid of much thought or solid content. All we get is words, words and MORE words while our understanding remains extremely limited. St. Paul’s description of the culture of his day is not altogether different after two thousand years when he said: “You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed.” In addition, the voices that speak those words are numerous and often false- like those SEDUCTIVE VOICES that always want our love, or those NATIONALISTIC VOICES that demand our allegiance, or those VOICES OF CONSUMERISM that want to convince us to buy this or purchase that whether we need it or not, or those POLITICAL VOICES that desire our votes. VOICES EVERYWHERE and we’re never quite sure which ones we CAN trust or believe.

But THE VOICE OF THE SHEPHERD is distinct from every other word or voice spoken to us. To begin with, EVERY PERSON, regardless of when that person was born or where he or she has ever lived, has HEARD his voice- there is no escaping it. To be “created in the image of God” implies that we are equipped with a special “sixth sense” (what some might call the “divine spark” or “a sense of the transcendent” within us) and that this sense, this inner voice, not only reminds us there IS a God but that we are ultimately RESPONSIBLE before this God. As the Apostle Paul makes clear in the beginning of his letter to the Romans, all people are accountable in knowing that God exists: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” (Romans 1:20) Isn’t it true that every

religion in the world is somehow an attempt to come to terms with that voice? Well I believe that voice is none other than the voice of JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF addressing each one of us through his Holy Spirit. This is him of whom John describes in the first chapter of his gospel as the “Word of God” and “the true light that ENLIGHTENS EVERY MAN who cometh into the world.” And what is it that that voice says to each one of us? The words uttered by Jesus Christ--the divine “Word” himself--to the heart and conscience of every person are ALWAYS THE SAME, words so loud and so clear and so unambiguous that they can never be ignored or drowned out, words that say, in effect, “Follow me.”

It was the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer who made the point in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* that the very FIRST utterance made by Jesus to the Apostle Peter as he repaired his nets besides the sea of Galilee were the words “Follow me.” Likewise, the very LAST words Jesus says to the Apostle Peter as they ate breakfast beside that same sea just days following his resurrection were the very same words, “Follow me.” Between that first call and the last, Jesus was continually extending that appeal- to Peter, to John, to James, to the rest of the disciples, to anyone who had ears to hear- "Follow me. Follow me. Follow me!" Throughout all his travels and in all his teachings, Jesus laid down just one requirement to become part of his vanguard--only ONE--and that was to FOLLOW HIM. Jesus did not look for conformity among his followers. He did not demand that everyone think the same way, speak the same message, or act alike- only that there be a willingness to leave their homes, to drop their nets, to abandon their plows, and then follow him wherever he might lead them. He never gave them a Sunday School exam; he never investigated their private lives; he never asked for a character reference; he never conducted an inquisition to weed out the faithful from the faithless, the disingenuous from the sincere, the orthodox from the heretic. He simply said "follow me" and that was all. Christ seemed to be saying, "Though you might not completely understand my words and my teachings, though my purpose and mission might remain obscure to you now, though my arrest and death may have left you confused and afraid, though there are times you may be so fearful for your own safety and security that you deny me and forsake me, CONTINUE to follow me- IN SPITE of all your questions, IN SPITE of all your doubts, IN SPITE of your frequent denials and moral failures. Just FOLLOW ME! and one day, you WILL understand. I promise you that."

I believe that Jesus Christ--the Word of God who enlightens every person who comes into the world--extends that very same invitation to every man, woman and child the world over. There, in the deep and private recesses of the human heart, Christ STILL commands us through his Holy Spirit--regardless of age or race, religion or nationality--to drop OUR nets, abandon OUR plows, and then follow him. He offers EVERY individual just enough light, just enough intuitive understanding to know what it is he or she should do, and how we RESPOND to that knowledge is what each of us must ultimately be accountable for. If we pause to listen to that voice and if we humbly obey its summons, he then promises to give us enough light to take that NEXT step, and in this way, we proceed, as the Bible says, “from faith to faith.” For as the scriptures tell us, “You shall seek the Lord and find him when you search for him with all your heart” and “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach).” TRUE faith is then not the same as professing a particular church creed or

doctrine. Rather, it is the PERSONAL TRUST we place in Christ's invitation to RISK ALL by ABANDONING ALL and then FOLLOWING HIM wherever he might lead us. Thus, with his death and resurrection, the gates of Christ's kingdom were once and for all thrown wide open to everyone. With the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, salvation was made permanently available to persons of every race, every nationality, and every religion, that is, to whomsoever heeds his call and then in faith takes those initial steps towards him.

But the most ESSENTIAL question still remains: amid the many voices that compete for our attention and allegiance, how can we separate the distinct voice of the shepherd, the voice of CHRIST HIMSELF AND HIS SUMMONS FOR US TO FOLLOW HIM, from all those other COUNTERFEIT voices? How can we tell whether the voice we hear most clearly truly IS the voice of God rather than our own personal desire, or the voice of pride, or perhaps that of sheer emotion? After all, history is replete with one example after another of persons convinced that they were God's personal representative, his chosen Messiah sent to save the world. If you were to ask those suicide bombers why--with explosives strapped to their bodies--they walk into crowded bazaars with the intent of killing as many "infidels" as possible, they would tell you that they were directed by GOD HIMSELF to sacrifice their lives in this manner. And their REWARD for such martyrdom- eternity in paradise with seventy-two virgin maidens.

But we don't have to look to the Middle East for examples of persons given to such paranoid and delusional thinking- we have plenty enough here in our OWN country. JIM JONES preached he was the reincarnation of Father Divine, Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus, Buddha, and Lenin, and even went so far as to say: "What you need to believe in is what you can see.... If you see me as your friend, I'll be your friend. As you see me as your father, I'll be your father, for those of you that don't have a father.... If you see me as your savior, I'll be your savior. If you see me as your God, I'll be your God." In the end, he orchestrated a mass-murder/suicide which resulted in the deaths of close to a thousand of his followers in Jonestown, Guyana who trusted more in HIS voice than the voice of Jesus Christ. DAVID KORESH, the leader of the Branch Davidians, believed he was the Lamb of God referred to in Revelation 5:2 and that he had been sent to pave the way for Christ's Second Coming. When Federal lawmen attempted to enter his compound, he set fire to it resulting in the fiery death of 79 of his disciples, 21 of whom were children under the age of 16. TIMOTHY MCVEIGH, who was responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing a quarter of a century ago that killed 168 people, 19 of whom were children, listened to the voice of the devil as he was convinced his actions would inspire a revolution and defended the bombing as a legitimate tactic against what he saw as a corrupt and tyrannical government. And just this past week, I came across a most DISTURBING report involving a growing conspiracy theory called QAnon which is continuing to gain greater currency across our country and which has even infiltrated OUR CHURCHES. QAnon is widely viewed to be a cult that alleges the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles that includes such figures as President Biden, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama, a number of entertainers and Hollywood celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Tom Hanks, and religious figures including Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama. Many ALSO believe that, in addition to molesting children, members of this group kill and eat their victims to extract a life-extending chemical called adrenochrome. But what's PARTICULARLY ALARMING is that a recent poll has revealed that around 15% of

Americans (which represents MILLIONS OF PEOPLE in our nation) who have heard of this dangerous philosophy agree with it and WHAT'S MORE, believe that "American patriots" may have to resort to VIOLENCE to depose these pedophiles and restore the country's rightful order which would include overthrowing our currently-elected President.

Furthermore, a growing segment among these adherents are AVOWED CHRISTIANS, many of whom call themselves "Bible-believing evangelicals." To quote Russell Moore, one of our nation's most respected conservative Christian thinkers, "I'm talking every day to pastors of virtually every denomination who are exhausted by these theories blowing through their churches or communities." However, what distinguishes their voices from that of him who was the VERY EMBODIMENT OF TRUTH ITSELF, JESUS CHRIST, is that they hear and obey the voice of hatred and death, NOT love and life. It is a fact that we easily pervert or deny the true intent and message of our Lord's voice when it tells us to do something we don't like or when it doesn't fit our ideology or is too demanding or costly of us.

The answer to the question of how we can separate the distinct voice of the shepherd, the voice of Christ himself and his summons to follow him, from all these others is that THE VOICE OF CHRIST is THE VOICE OF LOVE, the voice of one who holds out to his people UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE, the voice of one who is always insisting that he'll NEVER LEAVE OR FORSAKE US. Love, selfless love, tireless love, unconditional love- THIS is the HIGHEST CRITERION, the GOLDEN STANDARD by which we know whether that voice we hear is FROM GOD or whether it is FROM BELOW. As John never stopped reminding the Church in his first epistle: "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love."

The reality is that deep down in our heart of hearts, deeper than even our own CONSCIENCE, each of us has received the SAME summons to follow Christ, the Son of God. He draws us and commands us by the depth of his love and utter selflessness- one whom the Bible portrays as a servant on behalf of all persons. It is the voice of one who practices table fellowship with the outcasts, the despised and the ungodly, the pariahs of Jewish society, and dares to announce that God accepts them. He calls unlikely people as disciples in the service of God's reign. He heals sick people whom no one else would have helped. THIS is the one who calls us, and if we would HEED his call, then WE TOO must go to the SAME places and exercise the VERY SAME ministry of love that HE does. And if we remain attentive to that voice, and if we recognize its supreme claim over our lives, and if we strive to make our wills compliant to his own, then we demonstrate that we INDEED hear his voice, that we DO IN FACT belong to him and share in his eternal life, and are assured that no one will EVER be able to snatch us from out of his hand. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, you have asked us to heed your voice but too often, when we hear it, we find it calling us to perform something too hard or too costly or too inconvenient; therefore, we pervert it or deny it the best we can. Please be patient with us. Help us to develop the faith to be obedient when you speak to us. May we continually be attentive to your Holy Spirit, the "voice of love" before ANY OTHER VOICE, and may LOVE be the sole criterion by which we know it is YOU who speaks to us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*