

“Voices and Choices”

A Sermon Delivered at St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia

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Dear responders to the voice you choose to follow:

Among the twenty or so locations I've called home in my life, one of those places was Brooklyn, N. Y., there under the shadow of the Verrazano-Narrows bridge right in mafia land. It was in the early 70's, a time when the entire city was being terrorized by a series of brutal killings – the victims all young women. The body of one of the 12 victims of this crime spree was found in an abandoned car less than two blocks from where we lived. Days would pass, sometimes weeks of no activity, and then, suddenly the news would report another body found and the anxiety level continued to grow into outright hysteria. Eventually, the perpetrator was apprehended and the entire city breathed a huge and collective sigh of relief. In his confession the killer stated the reason for his actions was that his dog commanded him to kill, and he had no choice but to obey the voice of a dog named Sam. Son of Sam -- as the killer became known -- was eventually convicted and sentenced to life in prison and this bazaar episode was finally put to rest. To my knowledge charges were never brought against Sam, the dog.

While you might consider that an extreme instance of a mentally deranged individual, I cite it to highlight the fact that each of us every day from various sources hears voices. Often these voices are asking, inviting, oft times demanding that we make choices. Those voices might be internal such as the voice of our conscience trained to help us differentiate right from wrong; or it might be the voice of reason that logically attempts to discern what is right or wrong; or it may be the voice of temptation that tells us to compromise our conscience and ignore our reason with its promise of instant fame or misgotten wealth. These inner voices hammer us to make sometimes difficult choices.

Then there are a myriad of external voices bombarding us from a variety of sources attempting to impose sometimes radical choices about people, political philosophies, candidates, what kind of car to drive, movie to watch, book to read, clothes to wear, investment opportunities, diet and exercise, retirement choices, and the list just never ends. Recently someone was asked to describe an ideal vacation. Their response: “An ideal vacation for me would be to go somewhere where I can just shut out the world (stifle the voices) and not have to make any decisions” (choices). Probably many of you would subscribe to that plan at times. But let's face it, it probably will never happen.

Well then, again who knows? Consider what the evangelist, St. John, records in today's gospel. We find Jesus in Jerusalem celebrating Hanukah, the Feast of Dedication or rededication. It's the rainy season in Israel and, since sheep and goats were big commodities in the Judean economy, people didn't have much choice other than tolerate the fact that there were sheep everywhere. The shepherds brought them into penned areas from miles around the surrounding grazing lands waiting for the grass to green out and re-grow. In a couple of months around March or their month of Nissan after Passover they could herd them out again to the surrounding hills and vales until October or early November. Possibly some of those very shepherds were in the audience when Jesus describes himself as “the good shepherd,” a title that certainly had a messianic tone to it since the messiah was to be the son of David and King David had himself once been a shepherd. The reason Jesus can call himself a “good” shepherd is because he loves his sheep – loves them so much that he is willing to lay down his life for them.

In Jesus' day it was not uncommon for a shepherd, in the interest of diversified grazing, to split up his flock during the day into several groups, put some in separate areas, and then hire some young boys from a nearby village to tend these smaller groups during the day. In the evening, the shepherd would recall these smaller groups and pay the hirelings who would return to their villages for the evening. But there was a risk involved in that these young boys were neither willing nor able to deal with serious threats to the flock such as predators; nor did they love the sheep enough to risk life or limb for the few shackles they were being paid. So they would run to safety. The value of survival made the choice for them rather than any relationship they might have with sheep.

As the good shepherd, Jesus says he does not split up his flock into separate groups. There is only one flock and only one shepherd. The sheep of his flock are those who have heard his voice and made the choice to follow him. Hopefully, everyone within the sound of my voice has made the same choice to follow the shepherd who is so good that he actually did lay down his life on our behalf because of the great love he had and still has for us. But not only did he have the will and the power to lay down his life; he also had the power to take that life back as he demonstrated so potently and clearly on Easter morning and in his subsequent appearances to the flock who again heard his loving and familiar voice and made the choice to follow and to serve.

We note that this "good shepherd" speech of Jesus is given in the context of people who in his time were trying to make a choice as to who he was and was he worth the effort to believe in and follow. Jesus had just healed a blind man in the account preceding this one. Some who heard his voice made this choice, "He's crazy as a loon," or as the son of Sam I referred to earlier and rejected him. Others weren't so sure. *"These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"*

That same voice of the Good Shepherd can still be heard today, asking people to make choices as to whose flock they want to be. There are still many other sheep who are not of this fold but who need to be, says the good shepherd. Jesus' final words to his disciples were: "Feed my sheep." I am amazed as children grow how much they begin to sound like their parents. Over the phone it is often difficult to distinguish whose voice is whose -- whether it is the mother or the daughter, the father or the son.

In the same way since you have heard the voice of your good shepherd so many times, by now you should be able to copy that voice to perfection. As under shepherds, use it to call those outside into the flock for them to make the choice to follow him not only through the sound of your voice, but through your loving service, through the hope of your calling, through the manifestation of your love.

As you go about your activities the rest of this day, this week and into the future, may that same love manifest itself through you in miraculous ways so as to echo the voice of your good shepherd in making the kinds of choices for yourself and your influence with others that can and will gather a huge flock that hears and responds to the voice of our one and only good shepherd, Jesus who is the Christ, the savior of the world. Amen.