

The Voice
John 10:22-30

Fourth Sunday of Easter/ 8th May 2022

These are contentious exchanges between Jesus and the leadership of the Temple that we have here in John 10. In fact, John's Gospel is replete with them. These passages probably make us feel uncomfortable. They can sound anti-Jewish, exclusive, elitist, and even arrogant. John gives us a window into what Judaism was like in the First Century as it came to terms with rabbi Jesus and his claims to be the Son of God. The religious authorities consider his teaching blasphemous, for Jesus claims for himself an identity reserved for God and God alone. Some consider him a sinner, betraying the tradition; others within the same tradition have listened to his words with fresh ears and have started to follow him. Some have closed themselves off to the veracity of his claims. They have closed their ears. Others have risked listening to him and hear something in him that is new yet ancient, which has moved them deeply and caused them to follow him.

Both here in John 10:22-30 and earlier in chapter 10, we find Jesus turning to the shepherd-sheep analogy or metaphor to explain why some are following and some are not, why some get it, and others don't, why some welcome what he says and others reject it, why some receive it with joy and others are repulsed by it. From John's perspective, from Jesus' perspective, where one stands in this divide, whether one is inside or outside the sheep gate depends upon whether one trusts the shepherd's voice, the keeper of the gate. The "hinge" of the gate is our ability to trust the shepherd's voice. It's the voice and our ability to hear that matter here. The division or conflict with the religious leaders is that they want him to tell them who he is, and he has already told them so, but they refuse to hear it. Others take him at his word and discover that he can be trusted and that what he says about himself and what they discover when they are within earshot of his voice and trust is life in abundance—life, *zoë*-life, as John's Gospel reads, meaning rich, full, meaningful life.

Jesus tells us that the sheep know the voice of the shepherd, they hearken to his voice and wait for his voice. He calls them by name, and he leads them out of the pen into the pasture where they may graze safely. "When he has herded out all of his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him"—why?—"because they know his voice" (Jn. 10:4). They won't follow strangers because they don't know the voice of strangers (Jn. 10:5). "I am the good shepherd," Jesus said. "The shepherd, the one who is good, lays down his soul for the sake of the sheep" (Jn. 10:11). "I am the shepherd who is good, and I know my own, and my own know me" (Jn. 10:14). And there are other sheep who are from his fold, and he will lead them as well, "they will hearken to my voice, and there will come to be one flock, one shepherd" (Jn. 10:16). Still, the religious leaders want to know. "If you are the Messiah, the Anointed, tell us forthrightly." But Jesus refuses to give them a straightforward answer. He doesn't make it easy for them—or for us. "My sheep hearken to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (Jn. 10:28).

Jesus wants us to *hearken*. There's something about the voice. Hearing the voice and listening to his voice. Trusting his voice. Allowing his voice to touch something deep in us. Jesus turns our attention to the *ear*. Let's stay with this image.

Consider the strong bond between mother and baby who listens to the tone and cadence from the womb, who feels her voice resonating through the darkness of the womb, a voice of comfort and assurance. After birth, this familiar voice calms our fears and anxieties and orients us in the world. Even when she's out of sight, we know we're safe when we can hear her voice. Consider, throughout our lives, the voice of one who loves us, whom we trust, who gives us a foundation for living. Whatever our age, whatever life might throw at us, to hear the voice of someone we love and trust and cherish say our names delights the heart and transforms our lives. It is sad to think of the number of children who never heard a loving voice, adults who long to hear a word of love and affection.

At the end of our lives, hearing is one of the last senses to go in the dying process. Even if we are unconscious and unresponsive, we can still hear.¹ There are many stories of people who came out of comas and recounted what their family members said *about* them around the bedside. We learned in seminary to never to talk about someone unconscious or unresponsive as if they're not there. Studies have shown a dying brain can respond to sounds almost to the end of life. Even when a loved one is unconscious and unresponsive, we can still talk to them and offer words of love and comfort and assurance. You whisper in their ears and tell them that you love them. You can say to someone unconscious in the last stages of life that's it's okay to go. You can give them permission to die, to rest in the everlasting arms and fall, as the old hymn says, into the "love that will not let us go."² I have done this many times as a pastor, and it is always a holy moment.

Recent studies have shown that the health of our ears might tell us something about the health of our cardiovascular system. There's a connection between the heart and the blood vessels in our ears.³ Ears are a window into heart health.

This is fascinating, actually, and brings us back to text and significance to hearing within Judaism. One of the best-loved verses in Judaism is Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the Shema, "*Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." The Jewish people are people of the word; the relationship with God is based on words that are heard, not images. Hearing, not seeing is the essence of Judaism, including the Judaism of Jesus. In his work on the "Shema," Rabbi Norman Lamm (1927-2020) notes, "Seeing leads to idolatry; the worshipper creates an icon to represent what he saw. Hearing, however, leads to obedience; no physical shape or form beguiles the worshipper.... He obeys the Voice who commands him."⁴

We can see how the importance given to hearing and listening with Judaism was carried over into the emerging field of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) gave us the "talking cure;" he knew the value of listening deeply for what is said or trying to be said or won't be said and the potential of healing and transformation through listening and talking.

Years ago in Princeton, I heard the wise theologian, T. F. Torrance (1913-2007), say, "The way to the human heart is through the ear." I've never forgotten this. For the Greeks, wisdom was found through the eye, in *seeing* the truth. For the Jew and Christian, truth is discovered in the hearing, when we listen for the Word of God with the ear of the heart. The heart is touched, healed, and transformed through the ear. Don't we say "Listen for the Word of

God” before reading Scripture? God’s truth emerges *through* the hearing of a word: a word that we cannot tell ourselves, a word that forms and transforms us, a word of grace and love, a word of judgment and challenge, a prophetic, life-changing word, a word—God’s *Word*—speaks to the heart. For when our hearts are stone cold and blocked, it’s difficult to hear God’s voice. When God’s Voice touches our hearts, our lives are transformed.

Coming back to John 10, sure this text can be problematic with its inside/outside language. It can sound exclusive. Some people hear his voice, and some don’t, that won’t for various reasons. However, when we hear Jesus say, “My sheep hear my voice...,” perhaps we should ask ourselves, have we heard his voice? Are we listening to his voice? Are our ears and hearts open, or are they closed or full of distractions and loud competing voices? Are we close enough to hear, in range of his voice or are we far off? Why does this matter? Because when we draw near and listen and trust that voice, allowing that voice to touch the heart, everything changes.

For God wants to touch your heart, speak to your heart, the core of your being. Because it’s the heart that needs to hear God’s voice, a heart that is by nature closed, shut off from God. We all have hearts that have been bruised and broken by the world, even hearts that have become cold. Our hearts need to hear a healing word, a word of grace, forgiveness, mercy, affirmation, and love. A voice that says, “I no longer call you servant but friend” (Jn. 15:15). The voice of this friend, this shepherd lays down his life for his sheep (Jn. 10:11). It’s the voice that calls us to love one another (Jn. 13:34). It’s the voice that shouts into the darkness of a tomb and says, “Lazarus, come out!” (Jn. 11:43). It’s the voice that says, “Abide in me” (Jn. 15:4). It’s the voice that calls us each by name. That speaks in the garden tomb, “Mary” (Jn. 20:16). When Jesus shouted to disappointed disciples after an unsuccessful night of fishing, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?” (Jn. 21:5), as we saw last [week](#), that question paved the way for them to recognize him too.⁵ It’s the voice that pulls us close. A voice that summons us in love. The voice of one who knows us through and through. The voice that pulls us close to him. A voice that opens the world to us and shows us the depths of God’s love, transfigures and transforms our perceptions of reality, and then moves us to follow and love in God’s name. Ear to heart to feet, and then we *move* and follow him down the road he summons us to share with him.



¹See, for example, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/07/200708105935.htm> and <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrobinson/2020/07/13/what-happens-as-were-dying-the-first-and-last-things-to-go/?sh=38b616b52056>

² George Matheson's hymn "[O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go](#)" written in 1882

³ <https://www.healthline.com/health/heart-disease/ear-creases>.

⁴ Cited in "Hearing is Believing," *The Jewish Journal*, <https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/torah/11744/>.

⁵ Kenneth E. Kovacs, "Break on the Beach," May 1, 2022, <https://catonsvillepres.org/sermons/breakfast-on-the-beach/>.