

## Hearing the Shepherd's Voice

*Fourth Sunday of Easter, 17 April, 2016: Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30*

Several St. Thomas folks mentioned seeing the world premier of *Mother of Rain* at The Springer Theater recently. The author, Karen Zacharias, adapted her novel for the stage, I think at The Springer's request. The play is about a young woman with a tragic life who hears evil voices. It is a beautiful performance, very well done, but it is very, very sad. It's a story about mental illness, and about a community with no way to understand or treat what was happening to this young woman. It invites us to consider how we care today for the severely mentally ill.

Most people do not hear the destructive voices dramatized in the play, thank goodness, but almost everyone hears something. Our brains run a continuous loop of words we hear, experiences we encounter and things we construct. It's a blend of thought and feeling, reaction and awareness. Some people, like the woman in the play, hear voices that cause great harm. These folks need professional care. If you hear these kinds of voices, go quickly to a counselor or an ER. The sooner you get help the better.

But almost everyone hears something. Some hear disdainful voices – voices that say you're not good enough or you can't do it. Some hear arrogant voices that lie and say you're the only one who matters. Some hear anxious voices like be careful; don't trust anyone. Some, by the grace of God, hear life-giving voices.

I think of the book and movie *The Help*. Over and over Aibileen tells the little girl in her care, "You is kind. You is smart. You is important." Eventually the little girl seems to believe it. You hope everyone will hear voices like that that stay with them forever.

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice." Some in Christian history interpreted this to mean that certain people were chosen by God to have specially trained ears. These were the Elect, the chosen few blessed with the opportunity to follow Jesus and be saved. Everyone else was damned. I don't think that's what Jesus meant. I do not for a minute believe that only certain people are capable of hearing the voice of Jesus. The voice of Jesus, the voice of love and calling and security cries out to us all.

But we can tune it out. The people who questioned whether Jesus was the Messiah were tuning out the voice of Jesus. They were not listening to him. When we read "the Jews" in John's gospel, it refers to religious leaders who opposed Jesus, not all Jewish people for all time. These religious leaders who questioned Jesus did not listen to him. They listened to their own expectations about what the Messiah would be like. They listened to their hopes for a mighty earthly kingdom. They listened to what they wanted to hear, not what Jesus was actually saying.

So Jesus pointed it out. You do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear, pay attention, and listen to my voice.

How do we hear the voice of Jesus? From all the voices surrounding us in the culture, from all the voices that get inside our heads, from all the messages we internalize, how do we hear the voice of Jesus over all the rest? How do we turn up the volume on the voice of Jesus and turn down the sound of everything else?

This is spiritual work. It takes discipline and faith to hear the voice of Jesus, especially if we've been fed lies about what he might say. We listen to Jesus through prayer and self-examination, paying attention to our thoughts, consciously bringing them before the love of God. We listen through therapy, inviting an objective observer to figure out why we hear some messages rather than others and whether we want to keep listening to them. We listen through the 12 steps or other spiritual processes – letting go of resentment, making amends. There are lots of ways to attend to the voice of Jesus, but they all take intentional work. Jesus calls to us all, but we have to learn to listen.

And to help us hear his voice, Jesus gives us clues in this passage, ways to discern whether what we hear is the voice of Jesus or some other voice we need to tune down.

First, Jesus said, *My sheep hear my voice. I know them.* The voice of Jesus is the voice that knows us best. The voice of Jesus affirms what is special and holy within us. It lifts up why we were uniquely and wonderfully made. A voice that denies or degrades us is not the voice of Jesus. A voice that tells us to be something other than what we are is not the voice of Jesus. The voice of Jesus does help us see where we fall short of God's intention. The voice of Jesus does call us to repent and return to our true selves. But this calling and repentance come from love and possibility, not condemnation. *My sheep hear my voice. I know them.*

Second, Jesus said, *They follow me.* The voice of Jesus calls us to do the things Jesus would do. The voice of Jesus will never call us to hate or exclude or harm someone else or ourselves. The voice of Jesus will not allow us to be timid in the face of injustice. The voice of Jesus does not excuse turning a blind eye to the world's need. The compassion and pain we feel when we encounter suffering or wrong may be the voice of Jesus calling us to follow. Some people probably thought Martin and Sandy were crazy when they retired early from a comfortable life in Columbus and offered themselves for missionary service. But they weren't crazy. They were listening to Jesus. *I know them. They follow me.*

Then, Jesus said, *I give them eternal life and they will never perish.* Getting to know ourselves, following Jesus in the way of discipleship, encountering the pain of the world – these can be frightening journeys. They are hard work. But Jesus speaks above our anxiety. The voice of Jesus is safe. The voice of Jesus gives us confidence and hope, for this life and the life to come. Voices of panic and worry are not the voice of Jesus. Voices of anxiety and fear are not the voice

of Jesus. Those need to be turned down. Jesus speaks with security and trust. *I give them eternal life and they will never perish.*

*And no one will snatch them out of my hand.* The voice of Jesus claims us and owns us. No matter what we have done or not done. No matter what others say about us. No matter what. You are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. The voice of Jesus always, always loves us. *No one will snatch them out of my hand.*

Of all the voices we hear, all the messages we internalize, all the tapes that play in our heads, the voice of Jesus knows us, calls us to follow, speaks peace, and holds us forever. That is what Jesus sounds like.

And often, that voice comes through one of us. Jesus speaks to us in the scriptures, he speaks to us in prayer through the Holy Spirit, but he speaks also through his followers. Like Aibileen telling the little girl over and over she was kind, smart, and important, we are sometimes the voice of Jesus for people who need this good word. We are the voice of Jesus to a world that doesn't know how to hear him. We are the voice of Jesus to people who have heard a false gospel of exclusion and fear. We are called to speak his good word – that Jesus knows us and loves us and nothing will snatch us out of his hand.

And as we listen more intently to the voice of Jesus in our own lives, as we hear him more and more in prayer and in the scriptures, as we focus on his word of love and peace, he will speak more and more through us. His word of love will flow from our lips and from our lives.

So let's rest here a moment. Focus on the voice of Jesus speaking love to you. What do you need to hear today to know He has claimed you as his own? Hear that good news. Amen.

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church  
2100 Hilton Ave.  
Columbus, GA 31906  
StThomasColumbus.org  
706-324-4264