



George Prochnik, author of *In Search of Silence* said, “I think we’re seeing noise tied to a host of problems of the age—problems of attention, aggression, insomnia, and general stress. Noise is now the default position as a society. But I believe we have to make an effort to build a passionate case for silence.”

Spiritually, the major problem with the amount of noise we live with every day is it can drown out the still, quiet voice of God. We are all here this morning because on some level we want to hear God’s voice. We want him to speak to us. But, there are many other voices that compete for our attention. The voice of our boss, spouse, children, and friends are just a start. We often listen to ourselves way too much and most of what we tell ourselves is negative. Then we have a host of voices in the media telling us every day what to do, how to look and what to buy. All of these voices promise us that if we listen to them, we’ll have a great life. We listen to the voices that we believe will give us that amazing, happy, and wonderful life we want. Often though, that voice is not God’s.

Today we come to a story, a parable really of sheep and their shepherd. In this passage, Jesus is attempting to teach to his disciples—and us—the type of relationship he desires to have with his followers. Jesus is in the midst of a controversy with the Pharisees over the healing a blind man on the Sabbath. The account here is part of Jesus’ dialogue with the Pharisees, the religious experts of his day.

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, **“Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only**

to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (John 10:1–18).

The Good Shepherd and His Sheep

In order to understand this passage, we need to travel back into the ancient world of shepherding. Jesus’ culture would clearly understand this story but if you grew up in a city like myself, you’ve probably spent very little to no time with sheep. Let’s begin with the Middle Eastern desert. Good rain would fall from October to March and plants would come to life giving food for grazing sheep. Most of the year though, the desert was a hostile environment for life. Water was scarce, food was hard to come by, and dangers were everywhere. Rugged cliffs, wild animals, and unbelievable heat made shepherding a harsh job. Only the tough survived and a good shepherd knew where to find food and water. They also had to be strong enough to fight off wild animals and thieves who wanted to hurt and steal their sheep. To do this, shepherds carried a four- or five-foot wooden staff that was used as a defensive weapon. The desert is a desperate place and a shepherd’s job was intense, exhausting and dangerous.

The second backdrop we need to know is the Old Testament understanding of a shepherd. In the Old Testament, God is described as the shepherd of Israel who cares for, tends, protects and gathers his sheep. Shepherding was a powerful metaphor for God’s leadership of his people. Jesus is taking an image from the sacred history of Israel and uses it to describe himself as the good shepherd. In verse 22 John tells us that Jesus is explaining the

meaning of the good shepherd during the Festival of Dedication which we know today as Hanukkah. During this festival, every synagogue was reading chapter 34 from the prophet Ezekiel. Let me read just a portion of the scriptures all Jews would hear during the festival. Listen carefully to the warning given to shepherds: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: *"Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally"* (Ezekiel 34:2b–4).

The festival was a reminder that God's people, over the generations, were led by good shepherds and ones who have harmed the sheep. The same is true in the church today. With both backgrounds in mind, Jesus preaches a sermon to the Pharisees with others in view and reworks the example of the good shepherd. His first point has to do with the sheep pen gate.

Jesus is the Gate

A sheep pen was usually a rough stone or mud-brick structure, only partially roofed, if covered at all, or very often a cave in the hills. It had only one opening through which the sheep could pass when they came in for the night. The pen served for the protection of the sheep against thieves and wild animals. Out in the desert, if the shepherd could not find dry thorn bushes to use as a gate, he would position himself in front of the opening and be the gate. With this in mind, Jesus makes an incredible claim. In verse 7 he says, *"I am the gate."* The sheep pen has only one way in. There's only one gate and that gate is not a thorn bush but a person. There is only one legitimate way to enter the sheep pen and that is through the gate, through Jesus. To give added emphasis, Jesus repeats himself in verse 9, *"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved."*

In the world we live in saying there is only one way to God is viewed as both intolerant, narrow-minded and ridiculous. In fact, some use this very chapter to make the opposite case. In verse 16 Jesus says, *"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen."* People have used this verse as a proof text to argue that all roads lead to God. There are many paths to heaven, many gates and other sheep. But in context, Jesus is speaking directly to the Pharisees and most scholars agree, the other sheep are referring to Gentiles, non Jews, who will embrace Jesus as the Messiah. In John 14:6 Jesus will make an exclusive claim again, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* The exclusivity of Jesus angered people in his day and ours.

In a video based on his book *3:16 Stories of Hope*, Max Lucado illustrates the odd nature of the statement "all religions lead to God." This is what he said:

All roads lead to heaven. Well, the sentence makes good talk-show fodder, but does it make sense? Can all approaches to God be correct? How can all religions lead to God when they are so different? We don't tolerate such logic in other matters. We don't pretend that all roads lead to London or all ships sail to Australia; all flights don't lead to Rome. Imagine your response to a travel agent who proclaims they do. You tell him you need a flight to Rome, Italy. So he looks on his screen, and he offers, "Well, there's a flight to Sidney, Australia, at 6:00 a.m."

"Does it go to Rome?" you ask.

"No, but it offers great food and movies."

"But I need to go to Rome," you say.

He says, "Well, let me suggest Southwest Airlines."

"Southwest Airlines flies to Rome?"

"No, but they win awards for on-time arrivals."

You're getting frustrated, so you reiterate: "I need one airline, to carry me to one place—Rome."

The agent appears offended: "Sir, all flights go to Rome."

Well, you know better. Different flights have different destinations. That's not a thickheaded conclusion, but an honest one. Every flight does not go to Rome. And every path does not lead to God.

Jesus is the only way because he is the only good shepherd.

The Good Shepherd Knows and Leads His Sheep

Before we talk more about the good shepherd, I need to say a few things about sheep. There is nothing romantic or complimentary about sheep. Three words summarize them well—dirty, dumb and defenseless. Sheep are filthy animals, not the billowy white-as-snow fur balls we see on commercials for Serta mattresses or at the county fair. Sheep are also stupid and stubborn. Have you ever seen a trained sheep at the circus? Me either; they don't exist. Sheep wander off and never learn from their mistakes. They are easily frightened and confused, even known to plunge off cliffs in fear and confusion. Since they are defenseless and dependent, they need guidance and protection.

Who are these sheep? You and me! I know this isn't the best compliment you've ever received on a Sunday, but it's the truth. We are just like sheep. We are dirty with sin. We are rebellious and foolish. We need guidance and protection. I think it's really important that you and I humbly and honestly see ourselves like sheep. If we don't, we'll ignore the shepherd's voice and find ourselves in real danger. The comforting thing in all this is to know we have a good shepherd who knows us by name and leads us. It really should take a lot of pressure off our lives.

Sheep know the voice of the shepherd intimately and only follow his voice. When a stranger comes, they run! In fact, if a stranger

used the shepherd's call and imitated his tone, the flock would instantly detect the difference and would scatter in panic. A shepherd usually named his sheep and he could summon them by simply calling them by name, like Larry, Moe and Curly. Some even used musical instruments like a flute to call his sheep. This was really important because a sheep pen usually held several flocks and when the time came to go out to morning pasture, each shepherd separated his sheep from the others by his unique call. Although the flocks had been mingled together, each flock knew its own shepherd's voice, and each would follow its own shepherd and no other.

Like sheep, we have a deep desire to be known and cared for by someone else. We want to be loved and feel secure. The relationship between sheep and the shepherd is based on mutual intimacy and love. Jesus knows you and loves you. As sheep we listen to his voice and follow him in love. John tells us that the good shepherd also knows **you** by name. Revelation says he'll even give us a new name in heaven! Jesus knows you better than you know yourself and therefore knows exactly what you need and when you need it. He leads you into a secure sheep pen and cares for you as his own. Isn't that good news! Jesus is the gate. Jesus is the good shepherd. He knows and leads his sheep.

Some of you are wondering, how do I enter the good shepherd's pen? Maybe an illustration will help. When the infamous September 11 airplane barreled into the Pentagon, Officer Isaac Hoopii was nearby but outside the building. Immediately he began helping people straggling out of the building—in some cases, carrying them out. But Hoopii wanted to do more. Wearing only his short-sleeved blue police uniform—no mask, no protective coat, not even a handkerchief—he ran into the inky blackness of the Pentagon. Someone yelled at him to stop. "We gotta get people," he shouted back. Suffocating on smoke, Hoopii heard the building cracking. He called out, "Is anybody in here? Anybody here?" Wayne Sinclair and five coworkers were crawling through rubble and had lost all sense of direction when they heard Hoopii's voice. They cried out and Hoopii responded. "Head toward my voice. Head toward my voice." Following his voice, Sinclair and the others soon made their way out of the crumbling building.

Jesus saves us and calls us into his sheep pen in the same way. He says, "Head toward my voice." If you are not yet part of the sheep pen, are you heading toward God's voice? Simply ask Jesus to be your shepherd.

There's one more important aspect of the shepherd we learn from this story—the good shepherd protects his sheep.

The Good Shepherd Protects His Sheep

There are actually two types of shepherds mentioned in this story—the good shepherd and the hired hand. The hired hand was exactly that, a hired hand, a person paid to be a shepherd. He

had no connection with the sheep and no relationship with them either. The hired hand thought of himself first and the sheep last. If a sheep was attacked by a wolf or lost, it was too bad for the sheep.

There were also thieves and robbers who would sneak into the sheep pen and attack the sheep. Even while in the fold, sheep must be aware that there are those who would like to lead them astray. Just like the Pharisees, thieves and robbers attack the flock in subtle ways. You won't see them all dressed in black with a small flashlight, wearing a hood and scream mask. You are more apt to see them wearing a three piece suit and tie or a nice dress. They will not attack you with weapons or clubs that can do you physical damage. They attack the flock with pet doctrines that stir up controversies. They steal sheep with different forms of religion, lies and legalism. They often want to add to the words of Jesus; it's always Jesus plus something. Jesus plus good works. Jesus plus tongues. Jesus plus baptism. Christianity is never about trying; it's about trusting the good shepherd.

The good shepherd protects the flock from hired hands, thieves, and wolves. But the most important thing he does is lay down his life for the sheep. John writes in verse 11, "*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" Then in verse 17, "*The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.*" Jesus is the sacrificial shepherd, one who willingly places himself between his sheep and any attacks. Jesus is motivated by love and not selfish gain, "*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends*" (John 15:3). Paul would also write, "*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...*" (Ephesians 5:25).

The Pharisees had no idea what Jesus was talking about and in the rest of the chapter Jesus continues to explain to them that he is not only the good shepherd but the Messiah and God's Son as well. But it falls on deaf ears and only stirs up more hatred and controversy.

What does all this mean? Truth is, we live in a modern desert. You won't find much sand on the Peninsula and it doesn't get very hot, but in many ways it's a harsh climate to live in. Here's the question—Whose voice and what shepherd are you following this morning? We all follow someone's voice. The voice of money and success calls us every day saying work harder and longer; sacrifice your family on the altar of your career. We live in a very unchurched part of the country and the voice of atheism shouts at us saying, "You don't need God! He'll only hold you back from having a happy life." There's even the voice of religion saying do good, try harder and earn God's favor. The voice of relationships is another loud noise many of us hear telling us the lie that if we could just find our soul mate everything will be better. We want a comfortable and stress-free life and the voice

of self protection is strong too. There are many voices and many false shepherds.

If Jesus is our good shepherd, we follow his voice alone. If we do that, look at what he promises in John 10:10, *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”* The thief, the enemy of our souls wants to be our shepherd too but he’ll lead us right to the slaughter house. But the good shepherd leads us to abundant life. Why are very few of us experiencing that life? Because there are still thieves and liars sneaking over the sheep pen and deceiving us. We don’t have that abundant life because we are listening to the wrong voices. So what is this abundant life Jesus promises? It’s extraordinary life, life to the fullest, it’s real life both now and forever. It’s a life of faith and trusting the voice of the good shepherd. Corrie ten Boom used the acronym F.A.I.T.H to say faith is a Fantastic Adventure In Trusting Him! I love that! Faith is a fantastic adventure in trusting the good shepherd and following his voice.

How do we get this abundant life? It’s really simple—be a sheep. Listen to his voice. Follow his lead. Let him care for you. Dallas Willard once said, “The Lord is my Shepherd’ is written on many more tombstones than lives.” Is the Lord your shepherd? Is it written on your life? In order for a shepherd to know and care for his sheep, he has to live with them. He needs to be close to them. The Bible tells us that Jesus not only came from heaven to earth to be near the sheep, he actually became like them. The good shepherd became a sheep; he took on our nature and lived his entire life without sin. This is why he is the only one qualified to know and care for us.

Jesus laid down his life for the sheep only to take it up again in the resurrection. There’s nothing good about a dead shepherd. But through the resurrection, Jesus destroyed the three wolves of sin, Satan and death. The sheep now have a living shepherd. Sin has lost its power over us. The Enemy is defeated and Death is conquered. Through the Holy Spirit Jesus continues to guide, feed, heal, protect, and help you.

Jesus is our good shepherd and we follow his voice. I’ve thought a lot about that this week. What does it mean that I know him

and I know his voice when he calls? We know from the rest of the New Testament that we have many things that help us discern and recognize his voice. We have the written word of God. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit. We have the fellowship of other believers and their wise counsel. We have spiritual disciplines like prayer and solitude that make room in our hearts to hear God’s voice. But in all of this the one thing I must do is listen. There are many voices out there for us to listen to, but the older I get the more I just want to hear and follow his voice.

Psalm 23

The Lord is OUR shepherd, WE lack nothing.

He makes US lie down in green pastures,

he leads US beside quiet waters,

he refreshes OUR souls.

He guides US along the right paths

for his name’s sake.

Even though WE walk

through the darkest valley,

WE will fear no evil,

for you are with US;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort US.

You prepare a table before US

in the presence of OUR enemies.

You anoint OUR heads with oil;

OUR cup overflows.

Surely your goodness and love will follow US

all the days of OUR lives,

and WE will dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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