

Through the Voices
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Earth Day Celebration
April 29, 2012
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Texts: Acts 4.5-12,
 Psalm 23,
 1 John 3.16-24,
 John 10.1-5, 11-18

Somewhere in the middle of my pregnancy with Von I started having intense fear about the safety of my children. It would wake me up at night, it would keep me from falling asleep, it would haunt me just walking to the office in the morning. And it was incredibly visceral. I would see Cassidy walk by an air-conditioner in an upstairs window and I could visualize her falling into it and careening two stories to the pavement below. I hoped it was a result of hormones but after Von's birth it has continued and when sharing this at staff meeting on Monday I learned from my colleagues that fears like these can still haunt the dreams of parents whose children are full grown. And once grandkids are in the picture you have a whole new generation to be afraid for. Thankfully I can feel as I get further from Von's birth that at least the intensity of the fear seems to be lessening.

In my case it was fear about potential danger and possible harm. For some it is the memory of actual violence. The voices of fear that haunt their dreams have names; the stepfather that violated them in their youth or an event that traumatized them in their childhood or the parent whose angry voice still lives in their mind 50 years after leaving that house. For still others it isn't the memory of a particular, traumatic event so much as it is a voice of guilt or shame that sits on the edge of their consciousness issuing a never ending stream of commentary. As you listen closely to that voice of condemnation you recognize the timbre and cadence of the speech as your own. It may have started with your family of origin, it may have found credence in the cultural values in which you were raised, but over time it has become your own voice sitting in judgment, casting aspersions on everything you do and on everyone you meet.

Our texts this day invite us to listen for a very different Voice. From the iconic Psalm 23 to the familiar John chapter 10 we are the sheep invited to listen for the Voice of the Good Shepherd. At a Classis meeting at the end of March the preacher of the day took notice of an observation Jesus makes in John chapter 10 that the sheep follow the Shepherd because “they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger... because they do not know the voice of a stranger.” While that may be true of sheep, he observed that in his own life he does in fact follow the voices of strangers.

Or maybe a better way to say it is that all of us struggle to discern through the voices which ones belong to strangers and which One belongs to the Shepherd who knows us and calls us by name. All the voices I enumerated at the beginning belong in that category of a stranger’s voice that has become all too familiar. And there are so many others: voices that shape our attitudes, that form our desires, that influence our beliefs. Many of these voices should be strangers to us. They come from the hired hands of John chapter 10: corporations trying to sell us their products, governments trying to justify their warfare, people trying to rationalize the pain they have caused and inviting us to do the same.

The proliferation of these strange voices vying for our allegiance can drown out the Voice of the One who knows us by name and who has the power to both lay down life and take it back up again. Tuning out those strange voices is so much harder than it sounds. As 1 John points out, sometimes those voices become our own. Like the incessant chatter in our head, it is our own heart at times that condemns us. That leads me to the second place I stumbled upon some resonance with these texts in recent weeks: reading an article in RCA Today about a series of books called *The Good and Beautiful God, The Good and Beautiful Life, The Good and Beautiful Community*. The subtitle of the first book is “Falling in Love with the God Jesus knows¹”. The author of these books wrote them because he was aware (using our language today) of how familiar these voices of the stranger have become.

¹ Series of books are written by James Bryan Smith and published in 2009 by IVP Books.

We all struggle with beliefs we hold about ourselves and about the world and about God that need to be dismantled. And it cannot be accomplished by sheer willpower or simple education. Because those voices have gotten so deep in us, there is a training process that is required. We need to examine closely what are the narratives driving my life? Where did these stories come from? How are they leading me closer to the God Jesus knows and how are they leading me astray? This series of books offers what he calls *soul training* from the recognition that change most often occurs through indirect action. What Jesus was forever doing in the gospel, what he is doing here in John, is telling stories and using images to shift the narratives by which we live.² As we shift how we think, how we practice our faith, where and how we spend our time – all of this together draws us into the life God envisions for us.

There are some wonderful practices described in these books. All of them are grounded in the stories of scripture. All of them are shaped by the narratives that emerge when we are attentive to the voice of God. I want to highlight just one....one that came into my awareness on Monday during that staff meeting I mentioned before. Anne Duinkerken had devotions on Monday and she read from a poem by Wendell Berry called *The Peace of Wild Things*³.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

² James Bryan Smith *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 22-23.

³ Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things" in a book by Garrison Keillor, *Good Poems*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002), 426.

I realized in listening to this poem that there is wisdom inherent in creation that many of us have lost because we are so disconnected from the earth. We were talking about this last week at Early Worship. Peter Boogaart was observing that when we live 80-90% of our life indoors we live in a world of our own creation. And he is right. When we begin to get outside to feel the warmth of the sun and to observe the rhythms of nature - how loss is absorbed and how new life persists – we begin to immerse ourselves in the world of God’s creation and we can hear a little more clearly the Voice of the One who knows us and calls us by name.

All of a sudden the images of our texts sound like more than just metaphor. There is wisdom in literally letting God lead us beside still waters and to lay down in green pastures. These are places where our souls are restored and our bodies are nourished. And the more that we experience these wild places and the more we learn about them, the more keenly we become aware of God’s Voice breaking through speaking through the wisdom of creation. To me that is a fitting way to honor Earth Day: to commit ourselves in the days ahead to seek out the peace of wild things, to revel in God’s world, to listen for the wisdom we can glean there, and to honor the ways that God restores our souls as we live in communion with the world God has made.

And as the Psalmist sings, the Shepherd who leads us beside still waters and restores our souls will also set before us a table.

So it is on this day, that we come to this table as yet one more place to find communion with the One who knows us by name and does not let us go.

The invitation is given: “Come for all things are now ready.”

And as you come, listen for the Voice of God.

Amen.