

**Discerning The Way!**

**John 10:1-10**

**May 3, 2020 (Fourth Sunday of Easter)**

**Text e-mailed (No Service due to COVID-19 Pandemic)**

**Rev. C. Dan Brand**

Normally, this is always an exciting time of the year when spring is all around us. The pace is frantic and not enough hours in the day to do all that needs to be done. There are so many fish to be caught, so many honey-dos, sermons to prepare, and garden/yard chores. We know that in normal times that it is all bearable since summer is coming. We may even feel twinges of regret about the things that we wanted to do that we didn't get around to, or the things that we might do better, if we could, but there is also a wonderful sense of closure and satisfaction. For good or for bad, winter is gone and spring has surely sprung.

**BUT, this is not a normal spring for our lives! We had COVID-19 Pandemic. We have been unable to gather to worship and go about our normal spring. God didn't change the spring—we still have all the beautiful flowers and trees in full bloom. However we do not know what it is going to be like to face a time when we must move from what is familiar into an unknown and uncertain future.**

Again and again throughout life, we make decisions about which path to follow as we seek to create a good and meaningful life. There are pivotal moments when we make choices which have significant consequences for our future----when will this Pandemic be over? when can I graduate?, when can I go to church?, the decision to get married; the decision to have children; the decision to make a career change. Sometimes these decisions come easily to us. But other times, these days in particular, they feel like a tremendous burden and we fear making the wrong choice. We are struggling with how to know which one among the many choices is the right one for us.

Then, there are the casual decisions that we make, which over time give expression to our values and shape the character of our lives. These are the common, everyday choices like: what kind of relationships we have; how we spend our time; what kind of work we do; where do I spend my money; what we think about often; how we get involved in our community; how we treat other people; what we keep and what we give away; how we go about worship; and how we play. Daily, we are faced with

**choices about how we will live and taken together, these decisions reflect who we are and the values we hold most dear.**

**So how do we learn to discern what is right; in these pivotal moments, and in this day and time of the Pandemic? How do we make the right good decisions that will lead to the kind of life we want to have? How do we know each one of us, individually, what is the right way to go? Finding or failing to find a satisfactory answer to this question is part of the human condition. It is the challenge of life that each one of us must face. How do we know, what is the right way to go?**

**The gospel of John says that the shepherd of the sheep. “Calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all His own; He goes ahead of them and the sheep follow Him because they know His voice” (John 10:3-4). This is remarkable scripture for us during these times. First, it asserts that we are sheep and that we have a Shepherd. It may make us uncomfortable; we may be resistant to the idea but the scripture says that someone else has ownership rights to us. Our lives are not just our own to do with what we choose. The Shepherd calls His own sheep. In this text, Jesus asserts that we belong to him. We are part of God’s flock. The Shepherd has a claim on us.**

**And the Shepherd calls us by name. Each one, individually, called, named by God. What an awesome claim to make---that each one of us is called by the Creator and Author of Life. The same God who created the vast universe—with more than 250 billion stars; the same God who created the amazing diversity of life—so that if we examine a handful of soil under an electron microscope, we discover that it teems with billions upon billions of micro organisms; the same God who brought all this into being, from the most gigantic galaxy to the most minute microbe; the same God who designed creation to function flawlessly according to laws of a unity and order, whose perfection we are only beginning to grasp, this same God calls us by name. I’m sure that God had a good purpose for viruses but since the Garden of Eden, we have messed it up, causing us harm.**

**Individually, one by one-----Bob, Dan, Ruth Anne, Pat, Stella, Kitty, Fred, and each of you reading this are all called by name because each of us matters to God. Do you understand how amazing that is? This isn’t an indifferent overseer, not an absent landlord, but a Shepherd who knows us intimately and calls us by name.**

So how do we know when our name is being called by the Shepherd? Many of us could describe experiences when we've felt a presence, an awareness, a peace, a power that was intangible yet nevertheless very real. Perhaps it was a moment in prayer, or a time of quiet reflection. We have had a lot of that lately. Maybe it was a dream that has stayed with you or a song that reverberates in your heart. I know that the song "The Prayer" has been playing in my head and heart for several days. It could have been a moment of deep connection with a stranger or an experience of being loved. It might have been a time struggle when you endured more than you were able or perhaps it was a moment of intense joy. There are so many ways that God reaches out to us, pursuing us, wooing us, watching over us, calling us by name, inviting us into closer relationship. God desires to be known by us, even as we are known by God.

In this scripture, Jesus says that we can know the Shepherd. The sheep know the Shepherd's voice. God wants to be known. God wants to be so familiar to us, so close to us that we will have no difficulty discerning God's voice from all others.

Think about the people you are closest to. Imagine the voices that you know so well that you recognize on the phone or in the dark. My mother had 10 children and I can never remember a time when I called her that she "Asked who this is?" When you hear their voice, you don't need to ask---who is it. I recall a young girl coming to the altar once and as she began to pray, she said, "God, this is Mary....." God knew which Mary. When your friends speak to you; their words mean more than what they say in a given moment because of all that has gone before. And when they ask something of you, you aren't afraid to comply because you trust them and know that they have your best interests at heart.

The Shepherd desires a relationship with us that are so close and intimate that we immediately discern His voice from all others. The Shepherd wants to be so well known, so trusted that the very sound of His voice comforts us because we know the Shepherd's character. The Shepherd is like a parent whose voice reaches out through the darkness to calm her/his child in the midst of the storm. We have had plenty of those times lately. The Shepherd is like the parent who protects the children from all harm. We trust the Shepherd because He lays down His life for the sheep. He gives whatever is needed to lead us into abundant life. It is through the quality of the relationship and the experience of God's love and care that we begin to trust enough to follow wherever the Shepherd leads.

**So you may be asking in these unsettling times, how do we go about developing that quality of relationship with the Shepherd? We have to do what we do with any other relationship. We have to spend time together. Even when we are quarantined, this is possible. We have to be open, vulnerable and honest. We have to be totally ourselves. We have to be willing to open our hearts. We have to have a genuine desire to know the Shepherd. We have to be good listeners. We have to be willing to take the risk of trusting the Shepherd, first with small things, and then as our faith and confidence grow, with our whole lives.**

**Of course, the best place to develop this intimate relationship is in the Sheepfold. For that is where the sheep get called out by name. In this time of the Pandemic, how do we come to the sheepfold? Remember, that the building located at 8824 Edgemont road is only the place where the church gathers. We are the Church, so how do we get in the Sheepfold when we can't gather together? We all have contact information for each one of the Sheepfold. When was the last time you made a call, text, e-mail or made contact part of the sheepfold? Until we can gather back in worship, we can use this opportunity to learn stories from our friends and how they got to know the Shepherd. It is through the Body of Christ (Sheepfold) that we learn the Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth (BIBLE).**

**We were never, and even now, intended to face the future alone or to have to discern what is right alone. The Shepherd has made us part of the flock so that we might benefit from the wisdom of those who have followed the Shepherd across the ages, and from the support and guidance of those who continue to listen for the Shepherd's distinct voice.**

**The Shepherd has brought us into the Sheepfold so that together we might find the way to safe pasture and abundant life. He has blessed us during this Pandemic. I am not aware of anyone in this congregation that has been positive for the corona-virus. He has given us nourishment for our deepest needs, protection from all that could harm us, clarity of discernment to recognize those who would lead us astray, strength for times of trouble, and courage to follow the Shepherd wherever we are led; knowing that in all things the Shepherd's desire is to lead us to an abundant life.**

**That trust is really the heart of faith—whether or not we truly believe that the Shepherd and guardian of our souls leads us to life abundant. If we believe this, then we need not be afraid to be led into the future because we are confident that we won't face it alone and that whatever the future may hold, the**

**Shepherd goes ahead of us, preparing the way, turning even the most violent Virus into an abundant blessing.**

**What a wonderful hope that gives us, to know that wherever we go, whatever uncertainty or dangers we face, the Shepherd goes before us to lead us through and bring us home again to safe pasture.**

**We also face the future together as the church. The Shepherd calls us out individually but leads us forward collectively as the flock. The Shepherd calls us by name but sends us forward together to be the church in the world. We are meant to share one another's burdens and joys. Our lives are not simply our own. Together, we belong to the Shepherd.**

**There is more at stake than what we want to do and be. The choices that we make, both individually and collectively, will give expression to the Shepherd's character. This is the one who loved the world so much that He was willing to lay down His life for the sheep. As the church, created through the death and resurrection of the Good Shepherd, we are called to follow in that way of love and sacrifice. We are called to make choices that transparently reflect God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. We are called to embody the vision and the hope of abundant life that Christ makes available to us. For it is by our life as the church that the world will discern the Shepherd's care and leading.**

**When we make choices about the future, we do so with the realization that our life is part of God's life in the world. Who we become and what we do matters to God. WE have a greater charge than simply "doing our own thing" or "going our own way." We have a greater purpose for living and a much larger hope than what we are able to accomplish on our own.**

**Discerning how to create a good life, an abundant life, is an awesome responsibility but it is not up to us alone. We are part of God's flock and we have a Shepherd who goes ahead of us to prepare the way. Let us face the future with confidence in the God who leads us to abundant life.**

**Let us pray: Almighty Shepherd, we stand before you today with heavy burdens. Many of our friends are sick and some have left this earth. There is sadness in our hearts. But, Lord, we know you will lead us as a good Shepherd, not with fears but with gladness, hope, faith and love. Thank you for keeping us healthy and for lifting the cross high so that we may see the way. In Jesus, we pray! Amen!**