

My Sheep Hear My Voice

David A. Baer

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Text: John 10:22-30

Do you ever talk to yourself, reason with yourself, *argue* with yourself? It's completely normal, and nothing to be worried about, at least according to folks in the neuropsychology community. I heard Charles Fernyhough of Durham University in the UK, speaking in an interview about how this happens. See, when we're small and just figuring out how to do things—to brush our teeth, or get dressed, or put the pieces of a puzzle together—we can't do these things by ourselves. We need help. And so we work on them together with a parent. And if you observe a parent and child working on a task like this, you hear a dialogue, as the parent says, "Put your arms through the sleeves of the shirt," or, "You only need a little bit of toothpaste." There's this dialogue going on between the kid and the parent. And over time, says Fernyhough, as children learn to do these things for themselves, the dialogue becomes a monologue ("Arms, straight up, through my shirt"), and then a silent monologue. The conversations we have in our head—about what we're doing, feeling, experiencing—are shaped by these early interactions with our moms. So if you ever hear your mom's voice in your head, you're not crazy, and it's not a coincidence. Her voice has literally part of you.

"My sheep hear my voice," says Jesus today in our text. But it's clear that Jesus is talking about more than just words. He's talking about the trust and closeness we have with him, just like with a mother or father—an intimacy that comes from being together, doing together, learning together how to be God's children. Talk is cheap, words are a dime a dozen, but the relationship Jesus has with his flock is rare and precious: "I know them, and they follow me," he says. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish."

In our text today, the religious authorities are trying to turn the crowd's suspicions against Jesus. This rabble-rouser looks like political dynamite to these authorities, who are trying to keep an uneasy peace with the Roman occupiers. They've seen Jesus upend the tables in the Temple and heal on the Sabbath. They've heard him talk about himself in unusual and challenging ways, claiming to be the bread of heaven whose flesh and blood give eternal life. The people are excited, and some think this Jesus may be the Messiah, the deliverer who will throw off the Romans and re-establish the Jewish nation. Jesus hasn't claimed to be the Messiah in so many words, so the authorities decide to force the question. After they have surrounded him, putting him on the spot, they ask: "How long are you going to keep us in suspense?" or perhaps better translated, "How long are you going to waste our time? Are you or are you not the Messiah?" If he says he's not the Messiah, then their problem is solved—the people following Jesus will be disappointed, and they'll go home.

But if Jesus says he is the Messiah, the authorities know that talk is cheap. They've heard the buzzing of the crowds, the people arguing with one another. The Messiah would do more miracles than Jesus has done, some say. Others say that the Messiah has to be a man of mystery, without a history or family, but this Jesus comes

from Galilee, and Mary is his mother. The authorities know that if Jesus claims to be the Messiah, the crowds will test him against their own expectations. They'll take the Jesus they've seen and measure him against a thousand petty hopes and desires. Trust takes more than words. As much as the crowds hope for a Messiah, they won't be able to take his word for it. So the authorities press Jesus with false urgency: "How long are you going to waste our time? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

Jesus refuses to bite. Jesus refuses to play their language game, a game designed to point the people away from what he came to do. "I have told you, and you do not believe," he says. But rather than rehash all the miracles he has performed, rather than offer up a new proof of who he is, Jesus puts his finger on the real difference between these pompous, scheming authorities and his tiny community of loyal followers: "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

Talk is cheap. What attracts Jesus's followers to him is not compelling arguments with words or miracles. At the beginning of John's gospel, as Jesus is first gathering his flock, Jesus peers deep into the disciple Nathaniel and identifies the straightforwardness Nathaniel is so proud of. He calls him "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit," and so Nathaniel calls him the Son of God and the King of Israel. Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman, naming her troubled history. She tells her friends, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Jesus knows his followers, his sheep, through and through.

But Jesus not only knows his sheep. Jesus invites them to follow him, and learn from him, just like we learn from our parents. You can see this unfolding when Jesus feeds the five thousand, and he has a playful dialogue with his disciples: "Where are we going to get enough bread?" And then he leads them step by step through the process of feeding the multitude. "My sheep hear my voice," says Jesus, "and they follow me." To follow Jesus means learning to do what he does. It means taking on the mission of Christ. It means putting flesh and blood on the love and grace and mercy of God, so that it can be seen, touched, experienced in us. And the only way this happens, the only way we can learn this is by hearing Jesus' voice, until it becomes part of who we are.

You can see why the religious leaders, whatever their motivation, were entirely off-track when they asked whether Jesus was the Messiah. As if any answer could bring them closer to knowing what it means to be known and loved as one of Jesus's sheep! Throughout John's gospel, no words are adequate to answer the questions of skeptics. If you don't believe what people tell you about Jesus, their answer to you will be, "Come and see." Come and be with this unique man, follow him, listen to him, trust in him, allow yourself to be drawn into intimacy and purpose, and only then will you see God in his acts and in his words.

The story of Jesus and his sheep is our story. Jesus invites us to share in this life-giving intimacy that comes from following him and trusting in him. This is meant to be a life of doing and learning alongside our shepherd. In our tradition there are a lot of words. Presbyterians like words, and we have some beautiful ones, especially in our creeds and confessions. But these words were never meant to stand on their own. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth." Those are the opening words of the Apostles' Creed. By themselves, these are just words. Just words, until we follow Jesus, until we become part of his flock. Then we hear him saying to us, "Consider the lilies of the field... consider the birds of the air... see how your Heavenly Father cares for them." We hear him inviting us to set aside all that we have and all that we are for the sake of the kingdom. We respond to an invitation to risk and to trust in God's care. And only then do the words of the creed come alive. Now we really *do*

believe, we really *do* put our trust in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, who provides for and cares for the whole creation, and for us!

Do you see how this works? Hearing the shepherd's voice—learning, doing, growing with Christ—is how we enter the kind of life where we can know that he is the Messiah, the Lord. Otherwise it's just words.

In a few moments we'll celebrate the call of God to Amy and Sandie, as they start their service on our Board of Deacons. I don't want to speak for them, but I suspect that as they enter into this commitment, they don't pretend to know everything that's going to be involved. The Presbyterian Book of Order has beautiful words about the ministry of deacons. (Listen to this: "The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress," G-2.0201.) But it's only through their personal walk with Jesus, only through trusting him as they reach out in care to you and to our neighbors, that these words will really come alive for them. Presenting themselves for service is an act of risk and trust! But taking this kind of risk is the only way we get beyond words to know Jesus, fully and thoroughly, as our Savior.

Jesus has an invitation for you too. Put everything out of your mind except the invitation and the promise. Jesus knows you. Jesus loves you. Jesus calls you. That's all that matters right now. But don't take my word for it. Come and see. Come and see how your life changes when you let go of the false security blankets that claim your trust, when you allow your life to be re-shaped around your trust in God. Or if you've already tasted this life, come closer. Jesus beckons you to rededicate your trust to him. Listen for the voice of the good shepherd, and everything else—all your hopes, your hurts, your fears, your prejudices, your expectations—it will all fall into place. Maybe you'll see everything differently as someone tended and cared for by Jesus, or maybe it won't seem so important at all. But if your heart leaps at Jesus' invitation, put all the distractions out of your mind and listen for his voice. Talk is cheap, but the life-giving intimacy Jesus promises is beyond price. Come and see. Amen.