

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia

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In the Name of God who is father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There's a wonderful story I want to share with you as I begin my sermon this morning. Now this is a true story. In fact, everything I tell you from this pulpit is true—some of it actually happened.

One of my predecessors as rector of Christ Church in Winchester where I served for sixteen years was John Baden who became Suffragan Bishop of Virginia. When he retired, he moved to Bunker Hill, West Virginia where he had a sheep farm. I would often find my way to his farm to visit him seek his counsel about things in the parish. He was always very supportive, never critical, and would only give advice when I asked for it which was fairly often as he had great wisdom and knew the parish well. He had been a wonderful shepherd in that parish and he was a great shepherd as well as a bishop in the diocese. My visits with him were usually in the late afternoon. In our conversations, I experienced some of the best sermons I've ever encountered. I remember this one visit in particular. As I got up to leave, Bishop Baden said to me, "Boy, (he always called me boy) let's go out and feed them sheep out there. It's time for their dinner." "That's fine," I said, "I'd love to watch you feed those sheep." We walked down to the barn. I turned my gaze to look out into a pasture where about 30 sheep were grazing and otherwise occupying themselves on that spring afternoon. I said, Bishop, how do they know when to come?" Bishop Baden, with a twinkle in his eye, said to me, "Now you call 'em." I said, "Now, what do I say to them?" He said, "You say 'Hey sheep, hey sheep, come and get it.'" So I called out, "Hey sheep, hey sheep, come and get it!" Moments passed. The sheep continued to graze and do whatever they had been doing. There was no response whatsoever to my invitation to them to come for dinner. I looked at the bishop and he looked at me and

said, "Try again." So I called out again, this time a little louder as perhaps they had not heard me the first time, "Hey sheep, hey sheep, come and get it!" Moments passed. As before, they remained oblivious to my invitation. I said to the bishop, "Was it something I said last time I was here? Did I offend them in some way?" He said, try one more time. I did. "Hey sheep, hey sheep, come and get it." As before, no response. Bishop Baden looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. He then turned, looked out just as I had done, and called out the exact words I had said, "Hey sheep, hey sheep, come and get it!" Immediately, the heads of every one of those 30 sheep turned toward his voice and each began to scamper down the little hillside and across the pasture and came toward the barn whereupon he began to feed them. I said to the bishop. "Now talk to me in words I can understand. What was that about?" Bishop Baden smiled. "Them sheep," he said, "don't know your voice. They're not going to respond to a voice they don't know and don't trust. You might be a nice guy, you understand, but they don't know your voice. You see, they know mine. They'll come to me. You understand what I mean?"

As I drove home that afternoon it occurred to me that there was a sermon in what had just happened on that farm. I swear that's exactly what happened and I have never forgotten it. As I read the gospel passage from John for today, that vivid memory of John Baden and his sheep came to mind once again. Those sheep came to him because they knew his voice. And what is more, they trusted his voice.

To whose voices do you and I listen? Whose voices are the ones that you and I trust? This Fourth Sunday of Easter is traditionally observed as Good Shepherd Sunday. It would help first of all to dispel a false impression we often have regarding sheep. There is a myth that sheep are dumb and so we don't want to be thought of as being dumb as sheep. Actually, the opposite is true about sheep. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her sermon, "The Voice of the Shepherd," tells of someone she knows well who actually grew up on a sheep ranch and who can dispel the myth that sheep are dumb from first-hand experience. It was actually the cattle ranchers who started that myth because sheep do not act like cows. Cows, you see, are herded from the rear with shouts and prods from the cowboys. But that does not work with sheep. If you stand behind sheep making noises, they will think you are a little odd. Sheep will move around and try to get

behind you because they want to be led. But they will need to trust you and they will not go anywhere that their trusted shepherd does not go first to show them that everything is all right. Sheep seem to consider their shepherds as part of their family, and the relationship that grows up between the two is quite amazing. They develop a language of their own to which outsiders are not privy. The shepherd's voice is key. That certainly was the case on that hillside in Bunker Hill, West Virginia that afternoon on Bishop Baden's sheep farm.

Jesus said in that passage we heard this morning, "I know my own and my own know me." Jesus makes it clear to us that he gives his life willingly. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." Herein lies the power and yes, the mystery of Easter resurrection. Herein lies the message gives hope. Herein lies the voice of the shepherd who leads us along the right path.

Sometimes, however, we go astray just as sometimes sheep go astray. Sheep wander off and fall into ravines. You and I can fall into all kinds of ravines when we listen to the wrong voices as there are many voices out there that are vying for our attention, not all of them trustworthy. There are many distractions that lure us off the path. There is a wonderful prayer of confession found in the Book of Worship in the Presbyterian Church:

God of hope and safety, like sheep who go astray, we have wandered from your paths of life and light. We have heard the Shepherd's voice calling us by name, but we have turned instead to our own way. Show us your tender mercy: restore us in the security of your fold. Lead us back to still waters, seat us again at your bounteous table. Fill us with your Spirit, that we might bear glad witness to your saving mercy revealed to us in the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord.

You see, Jesus has promised that he will not ever abandon us and that he will bring us back when we listen to his voice. In this Easter season as throughout the year, this is a strong word of reassurance to you and to me as we struggle daily to be faithful. You and I have to make choices each and every day as we practice our faith. We find ourselves saying yes to some voices yet there are other voices to which our response must be no. The image of Jesus going before us, leading us in our decisions is a powerful image of the Easter resurrection, one that can lead us in our decisions and our actions.

That recent Thursday evening just over a week ago when a hundred or so people from around the Richmond area gathered here at Epiphany for the Hand in Hand listening session, we had a chance to hear first hand in small groups about the experiences that some of our brothers and sisters have had when race and ethnicity have had an impact in shaping their lives. As I listened, I realized I still have a lot to learn. As we commit ourselves to be open to listening to one another, what might we hear in the voices of others. What do we hear in each other's stories. As we hear the stories of others, where among those voices might we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us to see things in a new perspective? As you and I continue along our journey as individuals, as the Church, as a nation, what is the voice of the Good Shepherd saying to each of us who are open to listening? As one of you said after the first service this morning, "I find myself asking, what does the voice of God sound like when God speaks to me?" How does the Shepherd's voice speak to us so that you and I may be vessels of healing ourselves in this broken world?

I shall never forget the image of what I saw on that hillside at John Baden's sheep farm many years ago. A shepherd knew his sheep and they knew him and responded to his voice. When I can recall that image I am reminded once again that there is the voice of the Good Shepherd that can lead me and that can keep me from falling into the ravines of life when other voices that may not be trustworthy call for my attention. There is the voice of that Good Shepherd that can help you and me to keep on a straight path, and when you and I stumble can bring us back on that path once again. The image of the Good Shepherd is a powerful image. In our moments of loneliness, alienation from others, hopelessness, that Good Shepherd responds to our deepest yearnings for hope. Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me." May our relationship with the Good Shepherd, which is a sacred mystery, be for each of us a source of strength and hope as you and I face the week before us.

In the Book of Occasional Services which is a companion to the Book of Common Prayer, there are the Seasonal Blessings which we have been using in our worship here. The blessing for this Easter Season captures the very spirit of today's gospel. It is a fitting prayer for each of us as you and I go out into this week seeking to do the very best we can to listen first to the voice of

the Good Shepherd before we find ourselves distracted by other voices that begin to take us off the path. In that prayer of blessing we pray,

“The God of Peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant: Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight...”

May that voice of the Good Shepherd be the voice that guides us in the days to come. Amen.