

SERMON for Sunday, April 17, 2005
Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

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Madison, Wisconsin

No Stranger Here

"I am a poor wayfaring stranger, While travelin' through this world of woe.
Yet there's not sickness, toil nor danger In that bright world to which I go.
I'm goin' there to see my Father; I'm goin' there no more to roam.
I'm only going over Jordan, I'm only going over home.
I'm goin' there to see my Savior, To sing his praise forevermore."

This familiar spiritual captures all the intensity, all the longing, all the poignancy of life at its lowest, life at its saddest, life at its most precarious, life...just life for all of us now and again. We are strangers in a strange world, with danger at every turn, and there is no security nor safety until we are 'over Jordan', 'over home'. And that is why we find so comforting the image of the Good Shepherd, the Shepherd we call Jesus. In a series of mixed images, our Scripture for this morning speaks to us of a shepherd who, in isolated sheep pens, or a natural corral surrounded by a rock wall, will literally lay across the narrow opening and be the gate to protect his sheep from thieves we assume both animal and human. And in a different image, we learn of the ancient practice of sheep in a larger, community pen, where a number of shepherds would bring their flock for an overnight or two on the way to market, or to better pasture. In that scenario, the shepherd calls for his sheep, and because they are attuned to his voice and style of call, and his voice only, they follow him and not a stranger.

Perhaps it is a sign of increasing years on this earth, in other words, older age, but I do find myself occasionally in fits of nostalgia - I guess as the years advance I have more to remember! Some moments, as we know, are as clear as a bell, and we can come across a photo of our children or a vacation spot, and recall exactly the place, the time, what we were doing and with whom, and often, peculiarly enough, a particular sound or smell. Who of us can't have a whiff of nostalgia at the wafting of bread or cookies or a certain food made by our mother or grandmother, or even at the distinctive odor of a school gymnasium, even when the basketball team isn't practicing. One time my son, then about 10 years old, burst through the front door after school, stopped in his tracks, sniffed the air, and exclaimed, "It smells of clean!" And yes, I had been dusting and vacuuming and scrubbing that day. I have never asked him what the house smelled of the other days, but hopefully it was good cooking. Sounds have the same impact and ability to induce powerful recall - the lap of waves on the lakeshore, the wind whistling through pine trees, the whack of a bat on a ball, the rhythmic slap of a canoe paddle, even the tone and timbre of a voice. My father had a peculiar whistle - which I would reproduce if I could - that when heard would summon his children home from the neighbor's yard, round us up if we were at a picnic, call us back from the ocean's edge when he was ready to leave the beach. Even now, twenty years after his death, I can hear it in my head, and if I heard it somewhere, anywhere, I would be tempted to come running. This is the image of Jesus the Shepherd, with whom we have such a connection and such an identity, that no matter what, we will come running, we will follow, we will come home.

The only problem is, we are not dumb, blind, and innocent little sheep, mere puppets on a string. God created us thinking, rational, complex human beings, capable of making decisions and choices. How will we know the voice of the shepherd? Not a one of us can pretend that life today is not confusing. So many options, so many choices in every aspect of our world. Isn't it wonderful, we say, that when we decide we need a new refrigerator we can go on the internet, or to the library, and read Consumer Reports and a dozen other magazine articles about the best, most efficient, the best buy and the best deal. We knew what we wanted until we read about the options. Maybe I do want an ice cube maker - but which shape of cubes? If the explosion of information and influences was only about appliances, we could deal with it, but the explosion is pervasive, creeping into every avenue. From options for goods and services to sources of entertainment and news to advice on financial and investment decisions to lifestyles and homes, our minds are bombarded and we either ignore it all and take the easy way out by choosing the first and easiest, or succumbing to the persuasive opinion of others who may or may not have our best interests at heart, or become so paralyzed by the options that we do nothing at all. And how do we choose the way of the Shepherd?

How many of you look at the "Worship Directory" page in the local Saturday paper? I do, mostly to see if our listing is correct, and to see what other churches are doing. And I have wondered how that page must appear to a stranger, not schooled in the language of faith and church. How in the world would you decide which church might be for you? I suppose, as realtors will say, "location, location, location", times of worship, nursery facilities, physical accessibility, really the same criteria you might apply to any place of entertainment. And then you might look for a familiar denomination, if indeed that has been a part of your background. You might consider the pastors if they are listed - one might be a neighbor or a familiar name. Even the names of the congregations are no clue - First or Lakesomething or a more biblical name like calvary or bethel. How do you know if the voice that speaks and leads the congregation is the voice of Jesus Christ, the true Shepherd of God's people? If you decide that perhaps some religious research and reading might be in order, you enter a bookstore and are confronted with a myriad of Bible translations and paraphrases, edited and published to appeal to everyone. Are they even all the same, and which is the right one for you? And when it comes to books the choice is even tougher. Who is the author? The publisher? The theological perspective? The underlying opinion? Merely to be religious or spiritual is not necessarily to listen to the voice of the Shepherd. False idols, false gods, quacks and fakes, those who would pretend to have all the answers, too many who claim an absolute of right and wrong, priorities and values that claim our allegiance...shout louder than the voice of the Shepherd that calls us to follow. Is there a litmus test? Where is our discernment?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who 60 years ago died in a Nazi concentration camp, had practice in following the voice of the Shepherd. He was here in the United States at the rise of Hitler's power, and could have stayed, but he consistently asked himself the question, "What is the will of God?" And so he returned, to help the church witness to the power of life over death, the power of God's good over evil, the power of love over hate. He wrote about the advantage of celebrating Easter from a prison cell. Peter Marty, in Christian Century, summarizes Bonhoeffer's thoughts, "In a prison cell...you become entirely aware that the door is the only way out. More than that: the door of a cell can be opened only from the outside. When Jesus speaks of saving those who pass through the door, he has rescue in mind. Those who find that door are saved not only from the pernicious activity of phony shepherds on the

outside aggressively seeking their soul; they're also saved from a potentially much worse enemy on the inside - themselves. Abundant living isn't hard to find. It's a matter of walking through the right doors. The life of which Jesus is speaking is a life that passes through the grace of God. Jesus cautions those who would sneak through other passageways. Phony grace and false security and make-believe shepherds abound."

In this passage from the gospel of John that is our lesson for today, Jesus says of the sheep, "They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." And the gospel writer continues, "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them." I have been turning this concept over and over in my mind this week, the whole idea of stranger, and realizing that we might have difficulty as well in understanding what Jesus is saying to us. We have come to think of strangers as bad, as perhaps even evil, of not having our best interests at heart. We shy away from the unfamiliar, see as suspect anyone or anything that might be different, indoctrinate our children with stranger danger so much that they become fearful of friends and relationships, never learning to trust. And the concept of estrangement is all too common, when people who should be together - spouses or a father and a son, or neighbors, or sisters, or members of congregations - are strangers to one another, and lay across their life's doorways to protect themselves. Who are the strangers? Are strangers to be avoided at all costs, or to be welcomed and to be known?

Most of us have had an experience, at least once in our lives, of being the stranger, in our outward or our inner journey, and of being estranged from those whom we thought would love us. We have been alone and lonely. Henri Nouwen, the late Dutch priest and theologian, was a prolific author and speaker, and traveled widely leading retreats, seminars, and worship. He said that every time his plane landed in some airport, he had a fantasy that there would be a voice in the crowd saying, 'Hey, Henri.' There would be somebody who knew him. Each time he would wait for the voice and each time he would be disappointed. But then he would say to himself, 'It's all right. When I get home my friends will be there.' Nevertheless, the fantasy persisted. Every time he landed at a new airport, he would wait for the 'Hey, Henri'. Each time he would be disappointed, but then he would remember that when he got home his friends would be there. "So," said Henri, "heaven is going to be like that. God will be there and will say, 'Hey Henri, how was it? Let's see your slides.'" Strangers no more, we are one of God's own.

There is only one voice that calls to us and that is the voice of God's love. And there is only one voice that speaks through us and that is the voice of God's love. And there is only one voice to follow, and that is the voice of God's love. St. Anthony's Catholic Church in San Francisco, has for years served meals to people in need. Over the doorway to the church dining room is a sign in Latin, bearing the inscription *Caritate Dei*. One day a young mechanic, just released from jail and new to St. Anthony's, entered the door and sat down for a meal. A woman was busy cleaning the adjoining table. "When do we get on our knees and do the chores, lady?" he asked. "You don't," she replied. "Then when's the sermon comin'?" he inquired. "Aren't any," she said. "How about the lecture on life, huh?" "Not here," she said. The man was suspicious. "Then what's the gimmick?" The woman pointed to the inscription over the door. He squinted at the sign. "What's it mean, lady?" "Out of love for God," she said with a smile, and moved on to another table.

At the table of Jesus there are no strangers, only the promise of abundant life, a home and One who knows us, and even in that knowing, loves and welcomes us all. Amen.