

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: John 10:22-42 (1-42)

Sermon Title: "The Voice" (Trekking through the Gospel of John)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

July 17, 2011

On the icy continent of Antarctica, we find penguins. If we ever have the chance to visit Antarctica, we might witness a sea of penguins littering the landscape, extending as far as the eye can see. They could be of different sizes and shapes: some shorter and some taller, some skinnier and some fatter. But to our eyes, they all would look basically the same. They would all be black and white without any features to make us think that they looked different from each other. There are just a bunch of penguins with the same tuxedos on, and that's it.

However, if we look carefully inside that crowd of penguins, we would notice little baby penguins, and we might hear them crying out in a sort of high-pitched squawking noise. We might think that all those little penguins sound exactly the same. But they don't, not to their mothers. Each baby has its own voice. Each parent has its own voice. We might not hear it, but each voice is distinctive and easy to pick out, despite all the other loud squawking noises

surrounding them. The difference in sound to them is as different as red and green are to us. They are as different as classical music and rap are to our ears. Penguins know each other by the voice transmitted and heard.

By the time we get to John 10, we discover that Jesus has become well known throughout the land. People are quite familiar with his ministry, especially with his miracles. People are forming opinions about him. They have observed, and they are determining who Jesus is, and what his threat level may be.

In John 10:19-21, some people have formed the opinion that Jesus is demon-possessed. "He is raving mad," they are saying. "Why should anybody listen to him?" But others have formed a different opinion. They say, "A demon-possessed man cannot speak as Jesus does. His sayings are not evil in any way or form. Besides, how can a demon open the eyes of a blind man? If Jesus is going around and healing people, then he cannot be a demon." The Pharisees have already said that Jesus is a sinner. He doesn't keep the Sabbath, and he teaches people things that the Pharisees and rabbis would not teach. He talks about being one with the Father, and since nobody would use that kind of language Jesus must be mad,

or a demon-possessed, or something else.

Of course, Jesus weighs in and explains who he is. Throughout the Gospel of John, he guarantees that he is neither raving mad nor an agent of the devil. “The Father and I are one,” Jesus says to anybody who would hear. “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”¹ Throughout his ministry Jesus explains who he is by words and deeds, but people will not know his words and deeds to be true unless they listen to his voice. The clarity and truth in his voice would determine who he really is.

The Jews are gathered together with Jesus in the section of the temple area called Solomon’s Colonnade. These Jews ask Jesus a poignant question, “Tell us once and for all: Who are you?” Jesus answers, “I have told you, and you still do not believe. You do not believe because you are not one of my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”²

Jesus introduces an illustration that would be familiar to the Jews standing around him: sheep and

¹ John 10:30 and 5:19, respectively.

² John 10:22-27.

shepherds. He would not talk about penguins and the distinct voices of penguins: such cold-climate animals would be foreign to a group of people living in arid, desert land. Jesus does use certain animals that are recognizable to the Jews, and they are sheep.

People owned sheep during the time of Jesus – many more people saw sheep hanging around than people do today. Those people understood how sheep operated. They knew what it took to take care of them, to feed them, to house them. They knew how stupid sheep could be at times. For example, a sheep could get itself stuck in a thicket of thorns, and would bleat out for help without trying to find an escape. A sheep could wander off and get lost, and never find its way back home. Sheep were and are high maintenance animals, especially if you had to move them from one green pasture to another every day.

Jesus says, “My sheep recognize my voice. They know it. I know them. And when I speak, they follow.” Jesus knows every one of us dumb, lost sheep. Jesus knows that we cannot care for ourselves – even if we try, we tend to get lost. We tend to foul things up. We tend to not care for ourselves as perfectly as Jesus can.

When Jesus speaks, we listen to his voice

attentively. When we come to those parts in the bible in which it says, “Jesus says,” we are right there. Our ears are open, our attention is captivated, and we wait to hear what comes next. Jesus speaks, and we hear it. We may not understand everything Jesus says, but we hear it. We might not agree at first with what Jesus says – because Jesus’ words tend to make us take long, hard looks at ourselves, and we become embarrassed and even upset at what we see – but although we might not agree at first, we still listen.

Jesus’ voice has a way of putting us in our place. His voice has a way of making us feel guilty, and then remorseful, and then sorry for all our sin. Yet, Jesus’ voice has a way of bringing warmth back to our hearts. It gives us forgiveness and love and hope, and when we are finished listening to Jesus’ voice, we are ready to listen again. We want to learn something more about ourselves and others and God. We yearn to do what Jesus wants us to do.

Jesus calls us his sheep, and he calls himself the Good Shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd, because Jesus would never steer us wrong. His voice rings out, and he calls his sheep by name. He shows us the green pastures we should be dwelling in. He tells us where the still waters are, so we can get something

nourishing to drink. Have you ever run into a situation, in which you had no clue what to do? We have all had these experiences. We have to make a decision about our children's education, for example, and we may have two or three options, but we don't know which one is the best. Or, we have to make a decision about job and career. Do we take the job or stay where we are? Do we look for a different job, because we are not using our talents in our current situation? Do we save money to make repairs to the car, or do we take that vacation that will be fun but we will still have a less-than-perfect vehicle? Do we buy that cell phone or widescreen TV, when bills need to be paid? These are just a few situations we run into, and they demand a response. They demand action, and we do not know which way to turn.

Listen to the Voice. Hear what Jesus has to say. I knew a pastor in PA, who was a close colleague of mine, and he would have people come to him for all sorts of help. After listening to all their stories, he would eventually ask the simplest yet most profound question he could ask: "What does God want you to do?" What is Jesus' voice saying right now about that situation we are in? Have we stopped long enough to come to Christ in prayer, and just listen?

Don't talk, listen. "I know my sheep," Jesus says.

I know what they need, and I know what is best for them. “My sheep know me, because they listen to my voice.”³ When we listen to his voice, problems are not as large as they appear. Solutions come just a bit easier. Paths open up.

But you know what? It takes us being Jesus’ sheep in the first place in order to hear his voice. If we want to hear Jesus’ voice, we must desire to be his sheep. The voice is not heard any other way.

Jesus says something disturbing, something sad about the condition of certain people. When he tells them that he has declared to be the Messiah, he also says, “but you do not believe... because you are not my sheep.”⁴ Some people desire not to be sheep to the Good Shepherd. Some make the fateful choice to ignore the Voice, to give no regard to what the Voice is saying. They pursue their own paths. They listen to other voices that tickle their ears and make them feel good.⁵

This world is like a sea of penguins across the frozen tundra of Antarctica. Everything looks the same. Everything seems to be okay. Just as long as we don’t hurt anybody, not too badly. Just as long as

³ John 10:14 and 27.

⁴ John 10:25, 26.

⁵ Cf. 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

we get back home after the all-night party and can make it to work. Just as long as we are having a fun time. I was on a cruise the other week, in which the all-night Frat party was in full swing. The ship would have days that were called “fun at sea,” and this meant we didn’t visit an island but stayed on the ship all day; and so “fun” was drinking and eating and gambling and staying up all night, because you aren’t driving the boat, are you? Because you have no real responsibilities right now, do you? Some people live this way all the time. Life always has to be a party. It always has to be fun, exciting, which means you do exactly what your heart desires, which might not be what the Voice desires of us.

Jesus said that this world may include hirelings that are not as faithful as the Good Shepherd is.⁶ Hirelings act as though they care for the sheep, but any sight of danger and those hirelings flee. It is every man and woman for themselves, when life gets tough. Jesus said there are those who try to steal away the sheep.⁷ They voice a certain political opinion. They tell us about this new machine that can burn away the calories and make us feel good. They may simply come out and say, “Drink this. It’s good – it will make

⁶ John 10:11-13.

⁷ John 10:1

you feel good,” or “Smoke this. All your troubles will disappear.” Those thieves only mean to steal away the sheep, and cause them to be lost forever. Jesus says that there are those who are strangers to the sheep.⁸ Like penguins in a crowd, they may look like everybody else, but they use a different voice. They try to be leaders for the sheep, but they can only lead them down the wrong paths. The stranger might be a so-called friend, or a fellow employee, or someone we are acquainted with, who may get us into more trouble than we should get into. They don’t mean to steal us away like the thief, but they don’t live the kind of life the Shepherd wants us to live.

This world is like a sea of penguins across the frozen tundra of Antarctica. Everything looks the same. Everything seems to be okay. Yet, the Voice rings out across the ordinary and the common. The Voice is unique, quite different from everything else. It is easy to pick up because it is so different. It is easy to identify, because the Voice speaks of something much more interesting than everything else.

When we hear the Voice, we find a Shepherd who cares. We find words we can live by. We discover a life that will last forever, and a Companion, Jesus

⁸ John 10:5.

himself, who will never leave us, never forsake us for anything. “My sheep listen to my voice,” Jesus said. “I know them, and they follow me.”