

“Images of Jesus: I am the Door of the Sheep”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: April 21, 2024



One of the most endearing images in the Bible is that of the shepherd, who guides and protects and cares for his or her sheep.

We heard of this care in our reading of Psalm 23 — a psalm that many of us have memorized and repeat to ourselves when we need reminding of God’s care for us when life grows difficult.

In our New Testament reading¹, we hear Jesus discuss the hard work of shepherding. Shepherding is, indeed, a serious business. It is a 24/7 commitment. If you are a shepherd then you are with the sheep non-stop — leading them, guiding them, tending to them when they wander off and get hurt, finding food and water for them, and protecting them from wolves and bears and thieves. Day in and day out the shepherd cares for the sheep, and the sheep grow to trust the shepherd.

Part of the care of the sheep is the use of sheepfolds. Our passage from John refers to both types. The first type of sheepfold is a communal sheepfold. It would be located in a village and would have a gate with a lock. The second type of sheepfold is one that was used when the sheep and shepherd overnighted away from the village in the grazing lands.²

This sheepfold picture³ shows an example of the second sheepfold. There was typically no actual gate to the sheepfold. Instead the shepherd would become the gate and allow the sheep to come and to go in safety and peace. Similarly, the shepherd served as a protective gate at night in order to keep out predators and thieves.. The shepherd or shepherdess literally lays down their lives for the sheep.

One of the remarkable things about the Bible is that all of the shepherding references are true.

There are several scholars, including a professor of mine, who have spent extended time among shepherds, and the scholars attest that they have seen all of the interplay between shepherd and sheep come to life when they have spent time among the sheep and shepherds.

For example, all of the scholars have stories that affirm the ability of sheep to distinguish the voice of their shepherd.

My favorite story⁴ is about a shepherdess who lost one of her sheep up in the grazing lands. When she got back to her village, she checked with all of the other local shepherds and none of them had seen the sheep. Every day the shepherdess would go to the communal sheepfold and talk with shepherds passing through from other areas to see if they had found her sheep. Several days went by and no one had any word on the lost sheep. Still the shepherdess went daily to ask about her sheep. One evening, she greeted a shepherd to

¹ John 10:1-10

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of John: Volume 2*, 58.

³ www.bibleplaces.com, “A Walled Sheepfold”

⁴ Tim Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*.

“Images of Jesus: I am the Door of the Sheep”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: April 21, 2024



ask about her sheep, when suddenly there was a big commotion among the sheep. One of the sheep began bleating wildly and pushing its way toward the woman. The lost sheep had heard her mistress's voice at last and knew that she was home and safe again.

When Jesus reminds His audience of the ability of the sheep to know the voice of the shepherd, there is an implication that we (as the sheep of God) can know the voice of God.

We have been told that from the very beginning, God made us to be in communion with God. Jesus affirmed this when He came. He described that communion as a friendship, and He modeled for us a conversational relationship with God.

But it does not always feel that easy . . .

Few of us were brought up with the idea that growing in faith includes growing in the ability to hear God's voice.

When we listen in on people who share that God has spoken to them, we can either feel skeptical or we can feel less than and wonder why God never seems to speak to us like that.⁵

So how can open ourselves to recognizing and hearing God's voice?

First of all, we give ourselves credit for what we are already hearing.

Our first piece of music this morning⁶ suggests that we can hear God's voice in a variety of ways, including in creation.

With the first signs of spring, we might hear hope.

The quiet of winter can call us to more Sabbath.

This morning we heard God's voice in the Scripture.

Sometimes we perceive God's voice as a sense of peace after a long discernment.

God's way of speaking might come as a wise and timely word from a friend at a critical time.

We notice God at work when old wounds are healed and when forgiveness acts like a balm.

We often hear God when we sit in prayer and even though our thoughts are bouncing over the place, we can hear a hum of God's presence . . . saying that we are seen and known and loved.

Secondly, we spend more time with God.

Think for a moment about what human voices you can recognize in a crowded room.

Sometimes it is someone who has a distinctive voice, like Arnold Schwarzenegger or James Earl Jones.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, 17-18.

⁶ *The Voice* sung by Celtic Women (Apple Music)

“Images of Jesus: I am the Door of the Sheep”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: April 21, 2024



But more often we recognize a voice or a laugh because we have spent time with that person. The voices we recognize best are those we have a relationship with or have been listening to for a while.

So too with God.

Finally, we learn to recognize which voice is God’s and which one is not.

In my own experience, God’s voice is the one that is tender. Even in correction, the tone is more invitational than punitive.

If there is a voice in my head that is overly critical, never satisfied, and consistently negative, I can be sure that that is not God’s voice. We can call the negative voice “the inner critic” but just as the sheep can distinguish between their shepherd and a stranger, we need to be able to silence the “inner critic” by following our shepherd’s lead and our shepherd’s voice.

One of the reasons the sheep follow their shepherd is because they know his or her voice as the one who is for them, who is with them, and who will lay down their life for the sheep.

So too is it for us and God . . .