

“Your Master’s Voice”

By most accounts sheep are not the intelligentsia of the barnyard. Sheep are docile and obedient (to some extent), but they are also easily distracted. It takes all of the shepherd’s efforts to keep the herd intact. Many cultures have developed special shepherding dogs that endlessly circle the herd keeping individual sheep from wandering off toward a clump of tasty looking grass, and once away from the herd becoming lost or, worse yet, prey for wolves and other predators lurking just out of sight.

But as we heard in today’s Gospel, sheep do have one particular gift, a keen sense of hearing. We see this in the sheep’s ability to recognize its master’s voice among all the shepherds that might use that sheepfold. You see, in that era the sheepfold was a large corral where several herds of sheep might be penned up for the night. In the morning when the shepherd gathered his sheep to take them out to pasture, he relied on the sheep’s ability to recognize his voice and follow only him out to pasture. No brands, special markings, tags or other such thing was used, just the ability of the sheep to recognize their master’s voice and follow only him.

If a sheep can recognize its master’s voice what about people? It seems that even in Jesus’ lifetime people had a hard time distinguishing his voice from that of others. It is those other voices, those that are not truly the master’s voice, which sneak into our hearts like the thief entering the sheepfold. These are the voices that do not come in through the gate and call the sheep to them, but rather who come stealthily “only to steal and kill and destroy.”

How do we learn to recognize our shepherd’s voice? Like most things it takes practice. Children in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd do this by reading and wondering about this very Gospel story time and again. They listen to the words of Jesus and digest them. They enact this very story with a sheepfold, sheep, and the Good Shepherd. An adult upon entering the atrium (that is, the Catechesis classroom) might think that the children are playing with the figures of the Good Shepherd and the sheep. But draw closer and what you see and hear is something much more intentional and much more profound.

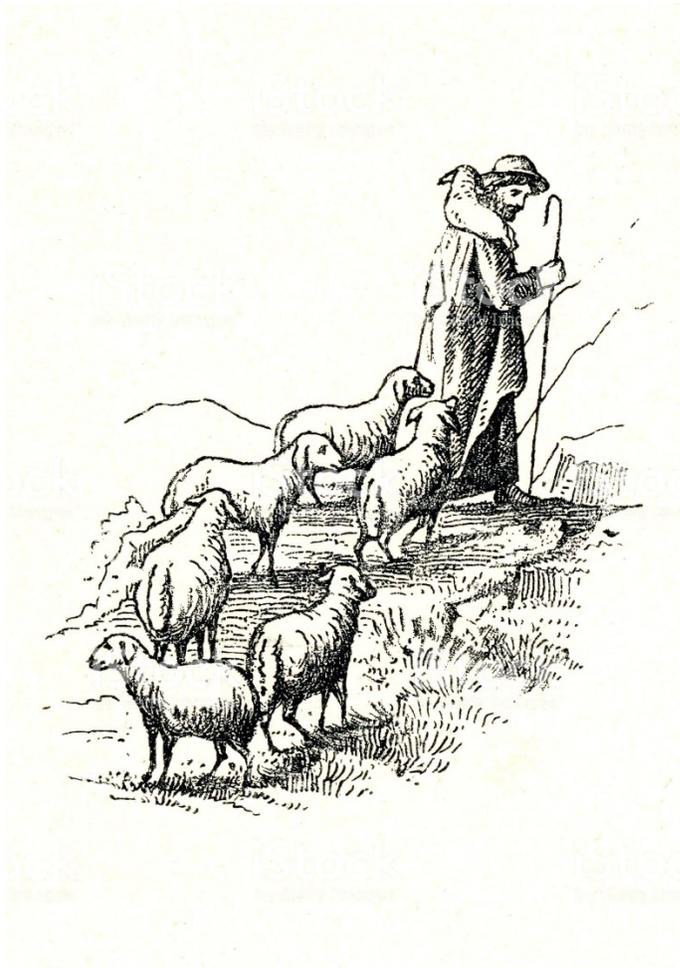
The children surprise us time and again as they work with the figures. They come to understand what it means to be part of Jesus’ flock. They learn how to know Jesus’ voice. They understand and it becomes part of who they are.

It wasn’t too long ago that a boy came reluctantly to the atrium. His mom almost had to shove him in the door. He was not happy. After our opening time he chose to work with the sheep and sheepfold. He arranged the sheep and the shepherd, just so. Then he turned to the rest of us and exclaimed, “Look the Good Shepherd is surrounded by his sheep!” Then he said, “The Good Shepherd is Jesus, and we are the sheep. We are surrounding him and loving him, just as he loves us.” It was a marvelous moment. He had heard the Good Shepherd’s voice even as he struggled with his sadness and hurt, and it was transformative.

I think that if a four-year-old child can hear and recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd then so can we. But like that child we have to put the other false voices away. The voices that interfere, drag us down, distract us from our best selves, and turn us from Christ. These are the voices that sneak in like thieves and bandits entering the sheepfold hoping to steal us away from the Good Shepherd. These are the voices that we instinctively know do not come from Jesus. These are the voices of selfishness, hard heartedness, distrust, self-doubt and fear. Prick up your ears and listen for that other voice the one that calls to you even in your deepest darkest moments. That voice is there in scripture, prayer, the sacraments, and remarkably is embedded in your heart from birth. It is the still, small, ever-present voice calling us home and back to the fold.



The Good Shepherd in the Catacombs in Rome



Another image of the Good Shepherd