

**A sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on April 21, 2024, 8:30 am Service.**

SOURCE OF LIFE

<Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23:1-6; John 10:11-18>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

“Aaaaaoooooooo....”

On a clear summer night down in the fields and woods of Camp Duffield you can often hear the howl of a wolf. It is not a real wolf; no one should fear sending their child or themselves to camp due to such a potential danger. But it is a game played by the Senior High youth. A form of hide-and-seek, “Wolf” consists of two groups of campers & counselors, one group hiding and one group seeking. Every so often, the seeking group will let out a ‘wolf howl,’ which must be replied to by the hiding group, giving the seeking group a general sense of direction and distance. But in the darkness, sound travels differently, and just because the hiding group will howl in response doesn’t mean that the seeking group has any clear sense of where to go; the sound is sometimes distorted just enough that the call is not heard correctly.

I would dare say that, at least to some degree, we have become accustomed to a form of “theological hide and seek” in our lives of faith, thinking that God is distant or hiding from us, or perhaps more comforting, distant and searching for us while we are hidden. I confess that there have been times in my life when I have certainly felt a degree of truth in this, feeling as if God was somewhere far away and distanced, leaving me alone and hidden. Even the psalmist, and other Biblical figures, has echoed this human experience, crying out to God and feeling as if their cries were lost in the void and unanswered.

Our reading from John’s gospel this morning again places us in the middle of an encounter. We hear, in these verses, Jesus’ teaching on how he is the Good Shepherd, whose sheep hear his voice and respond. We hear, as well, Jesus speaking of how there are other sheep he has come to call out to. In this, we can take comfort in realizing that even as we feel distanced or hidden, the Divine Person is seeking us, calling to us, reaching out. But to truly grasp the fullness of this dynamic and all it imparts, we need to back up in the story.

John 10 is the continuation of a story that began at the outset of chapter 9 when Jesus and the disciples encounter a man born blind. In short order, Jesus heals the man - on the sabbath, of course - which elicits joy and thanksgiving from the man as well as consternation and upset from some of the religious leaders.

These religious leaders seek to gain answers and understanding. How did this man receive his sight? Whose authority was it that made it possible? Why did it happen on the sabbath, instead of waiting for a ‘working day’? They ask the man, who simply

points to Jesus. They ask his parents, who wonder why they're being brought into the conversation, and who tell them to go ask the man again. Finally they ask Jesus, and in Jesus' response through chapter 10, we get the clearest and most direct explanation of who Jesus is and what he has come into the fullness of humanity to accomplish.

His goal, his ministry, is to bring about the fullness of life abundant, even above and in the face of death. He likens this to being a gate for a sheep fold, and how those who seek death and destruction sneak in but he, Jesus, is the one who will lead to life. And then he goes on to teach about how he is not only the way in which resurrection life, abundant life enters into the world, he is also the Good Shepherd. As opposed to others who have not lived up to this quality, or at best have been hired hands who run in the face of danger.

Jesus, rather, is the Good Shepherd, and he brings life and security, belonging and community, to the sheep, even at the expense of his own life.

A similar encounter, which further exemplifies this reality, is the one that we see playing out in our reading from Acts. Again, this is a continuation of the encounter we read of last week, which itself had its genesis in the occasion of Peter healing a crippled man. Again, invoking Jesus as the one who enables life, healing, and wholeness in the world, Peter healed a man who likely never would have been so healed. And again, the religious leaders were consternated and upset. Again, they questioned the man and they questioned Peter and the disciples as to how they were able to do this and under whose authority they acted so boldly.

And again, the response from Peter echoes Jesus' own response to the nearly identical situation: "that this man is standing in front of you in good health by the name of Jesus of Nazareth." The very ministry and new reality Jesus has facilitated into the world continues to be at work. Jesus has come into the world to make available the access to resurrection life, abundant life, healing and wholeness of body, mind, and spirit.

These entire discourses - from the healing miracle to the questionings to the explanation of who Jesus is and what he has come to see realized - is centered on one dynamic reality: that God has never been distant from us, and that God has never stopped calling out to us.

No matter the situation or how distant we feel from God, no matter what other voices of the world seek to fill our ears and confuse our attention, the truth is that God is never distant and has never ceased calling out to us.

Jesus' signs and teachings are not merely examples or instances that point to his power or authority, they are a sign-marker and directional toward the abundant life which he has brought into the world and made available in the resurrection. He can offer his life as the Good Shepherd because of the abundant life which is already taking root.

In this is the invitation to deeper and more comprehensive relationship with God in the Trinity of understanding and presence, and this leads us deeper into a sense of community and connection, of relationship and communion with one another. Not with a

God who is distant, far off, unapproachable or hiding but a God who is nearer and more intimate than our next breath.

The more our congregation, our community of faith which spans far beyond these four walls, moves into this relationship with the divine Holy Trinity, the more we realize abundant life. It wasn't the ability to see that restored the man born blind; it was the restoration to the community which he had been marginalized from which restored him to life in this world. It wasn't the healing of body alone, enacted by Peter, that allowed the lame man to be made whole, it was the reception back into the fullness of the body of the people of God. And in this to know and proclaim Jesus as the Good Shepherd in their lives and on behalf of all the world.

“What makes the Good Shepherd ‘good’? Jesus sees the man, and the healing leads to belonging.”*

And as we live into the fullness of abundant life, we see that our lives call out, in Jesus' name, to those who are yearning to hear and have yet to hear, yet to respond. It is not our own work, or our own effort, but rather the call that our redeemed and healed lives proclaim; the evidence that healing is possible becomes the voice of our Lord calling out to all the other sheep of this world.

“Aaaaaooooo....”. Jesus is calling, not with the voice of a wolf that devours and rends, but with the voice of the Good Shepherd, the voice of welcome communion, the voice of wholeness and resurrection. God is calling, let us listen and draw close. Amen.

* (Karoline Lewis, Commentary on John 10:11-18, www.workingpreacher.com, April 21, 2024).