

The Shepherd's Voice

La Voz del Pastor

El portero le abre la puerta, y el pastor llama a cada oveja por su nombre, y las ovejas reconocen su voz; las saca del redil, y cuando ya han salido todas, camina delante de ellas, y las ovejas lo siguen porque reconocen su voz. En cambio, a un desconocido no lo siguen, sino que huyen de él, porque desconocen su voz. [San Juan 10:3-4]

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. [John 10:3-4]

El pastor los llama por su nombre y le siguen, porque conocen su voz: ¿Te está llamando? ¿Estas escuchando? ¿Oyes Su voz? ¿Vendrás?

The shepherd calls them by name and they follow Him, because they know His voice: Is He calling you? Are you listening? Do you hear His voice? Will you come?

Que las palabras de mi boca y la meditación de nuestro corazón sean aceptables ante tus ojos, oh Señor, mi roca y mi salvación. Amén. [Salmos 19:14]

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen. [Psalm 19:14]

In the Gospel reading appointed for this Sunday, this story about Jesus evokes the image of the Good Shepherd. And, like any good shepherd, Jesus knows each member of his flock. He knows how many of us there are. He knows what we look like. He knows our problems, our concerns and what we need. He knows when we are absent and astray. He **knows** our **name**.

Now everyone has heard about comfort food – those little, and perhaps not so little, treats we all enjoy – especially when we may not be at our best. And I am sure that all of us have our favorites: *empanadas, tres leches cake, churro, enchiladas*, maybe even *arroz con pollo*. Well, today's Gospel offers us **comfort words**. How comforting it is to know, that we have a good shepherd that knows us, cares about our well-being, watches over us, and calls us by name.

In fact, today's lessons are full of comfort words. The 23rd Psalm is a perfect example. This Psalm is very special to me, because it recalls for me, time I spent with my grandmother. After her second husband died, my grandmother moved in to live with my mom, dad, sisters and me. In a way, I was real lucky. I had three parents: a mom, a dad and a grandmother. Among her many special gifts: she was very spiritual, active in our

church, encouraged my family to attend church regularly, spent much time studying the Bible, and she prayed a lot.

One of her favorite prayers was the 23rd Psalm and she often asked me to pray this prayer with her. At the time, I am not sure I fully appreciated why she drew so much comfort from these words. But as I have reflected on my time spent with her and our time spent in prayer, I have come to understand the importance of these words and why they were so profoundly important in her life.

You see, my grandmother did not always have an easy life. She grew up in the South, did not have the opportunity to get much more than a high school education, had to face discrimination and segregation, lost her second child to what we now know as sudden infant death syndrome, spent most of her working life cleaning other people's homes, was abandoned by her first husband and went through a divorce, lost her second husband to death not long after she remarried, suffered with crippling bouts of arthritis, and, in the last year of her life, broke her hip. But through all of this, I can't ever really remember her complaining about anything. We were very close, and we spent a lot of time together and I think I would have remembered if she had complained about anything. In fact, she was a very positive woman, she was kind to people, people liked her, and she had a way of putting a positive spin on everything. And, I think that the primary reason for her perpetual good spirit was her profound faith in the Risen Lord.

For my grandmother, the words of the 23rd Psalm were definitely **comfort words**. For me, since I prayed this prayer with her often, it was probably the first passage from the Bible that I memorized – or as I would have said at that time: *learned by heart*.

Her Bible was the King James Version, so she would have prayed:

¹ The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want.

² He maketh me lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the path of righteousness for his name sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all of the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

– Psalm 23: 1-6

Amen.

For her, these words most probably represented a promise from God; a kind of description and guarantee of God's unconditional love and grace. And, I am sure that

the imagery of our Lord, as the good shepherd, and the peacefulness of the pastoral setting was not lost on her. I think that every time she prayed this prayer, she found peace and renewal.

I don't know how, why or when my grandmother found the Lord. Having known her, it's hard to believe that there was ever a time when she was not in communion with the Lord. But I can't imagine what my grandmother would have done if she had not had her faith in God and her belief that Jesus is the redeemer of the world. I don't know how she could have possibly coped with the burdens she bore, if she had been separated from the Body of Christ, and did not have a place to worship and share fellowship.

I can only believe that however she found God, her faith would not have been sustained and her spirit would not have received the nourishment that contributed to her peace and the richness of her life, had she not had fulfilling worship and fellowship.

In thinking about this, I am reminded of an illustration from a sermon I read when I prepared this sermon. The preacher noted that, despite our parent's exhortation to the contrary, many of us probably played with fire at some point while we were children. He reflected that we have all probably sat in front of a fire place or a camp fire, and watched the coals glowing red and hot. We know, he said, that if we take a single coal out of the center of the fire and place it to one side, it soon turns dull grey, its bright heat becomes first lukewarm and then cold; while the rest of the fire continues to burn. So it is with us, he said: Separate a person from the Christian community, take them away from the place in which the word is proclaimed, where bread is broken, and prayers are said, and soon the light of their faith grows dull, and the warmth within their souls begins to diminish.

By comparisons to my grandmother, I would have to admit that I have had it easy. By contrast, I have lived a charmed life – and that is what she would have wanted. However, like all of us, I have had my share of challenges, trials, and problems. What has seen me through, is my faith and my willingness to let God help me find the answers and accept those situations where there just aren't any. At those times, I just ask for the peace of the Lord. And, like my grandmother, I am grateful to be a part of a worship community. Being a part of Grace Church has brought me and my wife a great deal of comfort and joy. I have not always regularly attended church, but, as I have matured spiritually, I have come to understand the importance of regular worship, fellowship, study, and prayer. And, now, like my grandmother, I do not know what I would do if I did not have a Church where the light of my faith could be sustained and the warmth within my soul could remain strong. Likewise, I am sure that each of you feels the same way.

While today's Gospel lesson may suggest to some a vision of passive sheep – simply obeying their master's call to follow Him, I would like to offer an alternative view. I would like to suggest, that through the words of John, Jesus is calling us to action.

Although I only have a little data to substantiate this claim, I believe that there are many people in communities surrounding La Gracia and Grace Church that do not yet have a

church home and who are looking for a good place for fellowship and worship. To extend John's metaphor, these sheep are looking for a good flock to join. I also believe that there are many lost sheep out there, too. And, like John tells us, Jesus knows them by name and He is calling them. But unlike the imagery of the sheep in today's lessons: they don't hear the Shepherd's voice. These sheep are distracted in other areas of the pasture. Some of them believe that they can go-it-alone, don't need to take part in regular fellowship and be a part of a worshiping community. I've been there, so I know that they, too, aren't in a place where they can hear the Shepherd's voice. They are all His sheep, He loves every one of them, He knows them by name, and continues to call them.

So, while I only have a little data to back up these beliefs, each time I see someone aimlessly wandering the streets on Sunday while I am on the way to church, each time I see a new face in our congregation, each time a young child is baptized, each time a person is confirmed, each time I hear that a person has come to our church seeking comfort and support, I am convinced that there are more sheep out there wandering in the pasture, looking – even if they don't know it yet – for a good flock to join.

I was sad to learn from a March 7, 2002 USA Today article on *Charting Unchurched America*, that, at the time of that study, on average 14 percent of Americans profess no religion. For them, as the a portion of the article declares “spirituality is found elsewhere” – in places like amusement parks, campgrounds, and private school philosophy of religion classes. Unfortunately, according to a Pew Research Center study in 2016, the number of “unchurched” people in the United States has grown to 23 percent of the population.

I remember that the Rector of an Episcopal Church I belonged to when I lived in California would constantly remind the congregation about the importance of being welcoming, especially to newcomers. He would especially remind parishioners not to ask visitors to move, if the visitor happened to be sitting in their favorite spot in a pew when they came into the sanctuary, since doing so was very off-putting and would likely discourage the newcomer from ever visiting again. The Rector's concern was that the church should not be viewed as a country club, where the insiders have member's-only, privileges. Instead, church should be a welcoming and nurturing community.

Fortunately, La Gracia and Grace are welcoming places, with much to offer our community, in and around the Alexandria. Yes, the doors are open for people who want to come in and worship here. Frankly, that is what drew my wife and me to be a part of this parish community. But is that enough – just to unlock the front door and welcome the visitors who come in? Borrowing from the movie A Field of Dreams: if we build it, will they come?

I believe that what Jesus is calling us to do today – right here and right now at La Gracia and Grace Church – is to go out into the pasture and help those sheep – both the looking and the lost – to find a good flock. As it was for the disciples of the early church, following

Jesus is **NOT** a passive activity. Jesus expects us to do our part in spreading the Kingdom. The late John F. Kennedy exhorted us to do God's work, by reminding us that "God's work on Earth must truly be our own." We are all ministers – lay and clergy – and therefore, in hearing His voice, in listening to the Shepherd's call, and by following Him, each one of us are called to be good shepherds: to reach out into the world around us, to search for those sheep – both the looking and the lost – and help them to hear the Shepherd's voice.

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The Shepherd calls them by name and they follow Him, because they know His voice: Is He calling you? Are you listening? Do you hear His voice? Will you come?

En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo, Amén.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.