

**See how they run?
Lisa Graves
Sermon for April 13, 2008**

My dog Tyler knows my voice.
But he does not follow.
He's a good dog,
and most days
I will tell you he's a smart dog.
Most days.

We accidentally found him
at a Bedford winery.
He's a mixed lab pup
Who was dumped out of a car,
Half starving and suffering from
who knows what abuse
when he was found and rescued.

He is a good dog, too
Playful and silly and loving.
He took one giant sniff
of both my girls
and fell head over heels
in puppy love.
And he is greatly loved greatly in return.

He has a shiny black coat
with a soft white chest

Isabelle, my oldest
taught Tyler to sit in a few short minutes
and she and Katarina
spend hours telling him to sit
and rewarding him with treats
and pats
and hugs
of encouragement.

Now, I bring this up
because although I can
tell you a lot about dogs,
I don't know anything
About sheep.

The only close contact
I have had with sheep
has been at petting zoos
and the occasional 4-H fair.
My ideas about sheep are formed
more by Mother Goose
than by any practical experience.

Perhaps you are the same.

But Jesus knows a lot about sheep.
And shepherds.
Back in the biblical days
A shepherd analogy was something
that every one could understand.

Now shepherding was a solitary occupation.
You might have many sheep,

but only one shepherd.
And the shepherd knew every
individual sheep,
and could call them by name.

Sometimes the shepherd
would have a whistle
unique to each sheep
so that when they heard their tune
they could come back to the flock.

During the day
the shepherd would lead the sheep
into the hills or pastures to graze.
At night the shepherd
would gather the sheep
and bring them to the fold.

Now with my American,
21st century mind,
I have always assumed
every shepherd had his own sheep fold,
like a chicken in every pot,
but this is not the case.

Apparently, community enclosures
or sheepfolds were common.
Many shepherds might bring their flocks

to the pen and lead them in
amongst the other animals
for the night.

The shepherds would then
take turns guarding the gate
of the fold to insure
no one came to steal the sheep
and to watch for predators
that might try to come
for a midnight snack of lamb chops.

In the morning then,
the shepherds would come
to the gate,
calling their animals by name
and by tune, one by one.
And the sheep would follow.
But they would only follow
their shepherd, the voice they knew.

So, today Jesus tells us
that he is the good shepherd
and that we are his sheep
that he knows us
and has named us.
And caring for us
is paramount.

He will lead us into the verdant pastures
we love from the 23rd psalm,

and he will guard us from danger
– the danger from predators and thieves
and the danger from our own
impulsive straying.
In fact, he will risk his life
to find us when we stray
and lead us home.

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Sometimes we don't make
Very good sheep.
Because the sheep
do two things right all the time.
They recognize the shepherd's
Voice and they follow.

We don't always hear the shepherd
or recognize the voice.

Our world has an absence of silence
so profound that many of us
can not hear ourselves think,
much less hear the voice
of God.

From the moment we wake up
in the morning
to the time we lay down at night,
we are surrounded by noise.

The radio wakes us up,

the television keeps us company
through breakfast
as we listen to the news
over coffee and cereal bars.

Then it's a car ride to work or to
take the kids to school
– again with music
or the hypnotic voices of NPR
reporters leading us all the way.

At work or home
we have the sounds of the media,
our ipods, our cd players
and big screens with surround sound.

And our computers can also
add music and voice
as we write e-mails
and compose letters
and research weekend plans.

The voice of our shepherd
is certainly there,
but it's often hard to tell
who we are really listening to,
if we are listening at all.

And we might wonder if
The voice we're hearing
Is really from God.

In our Gospel today

Jesus gives us
a voice recognition test
that we can apply
to the voices In our lives.

You see, Jesus tells us
that He has come
so that we might have life
and have it abundantly.

So when we listen for the voice of
Our Lord, we should listen for a
Voice that is life giving, not life denying.

So if we follow voices that
lead us into addiction
or violence or betrayal.
We are following
the sounds of the world,
not our shepherd.

And if the sounds that
Make us dance lead
To broken baptismal vows
or even marriage vows.
Then we do not dance
To the music of our shepherd.

If the voice that we hear
Call us into goodness and
Mercy
Then we have found our
Shepherd's voice.
And it is safe to follow.

You see, it's not enough to
Hear the voice, we must also
Follow. And that's the hard part.

And this is where my dog Tyler
comes back into the picture.
As I mentioned before,
I don't know a lot about sheep.
But I do know a little about dog herding.

In spite of his abandonment,
or perhaps because of it.
Tyler loves to run.
A door left open a fraction of an inch
is a wide open invitation to roam.
Given the chance
Tyler will burst out of the house,
tear through the ivy
and head straight for the street
before I've gathered the wits
to close the door and call him names.

He usually stops
at the edge of the yard,

looking back over his shoulder at me,
as if to ask,
“what are you going to do about it?”
and then tears out
into the neighborhood.
And then he’s gone.

He indulges in the sights
and sounds of the neighbors yards,
the neighbor’s dogs
and roams the middle school baseball field
in search of rusty soda cans
and decaying garbage.

He thoroughly enjoys himself,
and has no idea
of the dangers of cars
and broken glass and
dog nappers of the prowl.

His favorite time
to do this, of course,
is when I am in my bathrobe
so that I can run
like a crazy woman
to the edge of the yard,
calling his name in fuzzy purple fleece.

I usually find him
at the house across the street,
standing dead still,

head cocked,
ears trained to my voice calling his name,
liquid brown eyes locked on mine
as I slowly approach,
leash in one hand,
bag of doggie treats
in the other.

He looks at me
with canine intelligence
and knows my voice alright
– and then he runs.

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Sounds like the behavior of some sheep I know –
myself included.

As the flock of our savior
we too are prone to run and wander.
We hear the voice
calling us to abundant life,
to a better behavior and we run.

There are even times
when we stand in the presence of God,
look deep into the sacred,
and still, we run.
Or we leap without looking,
or we hide.

And still Jesus
searches for us, each of us,

all of us, and brings us
to the safety of community.

Jesus tells us
over and over again
that he will search
for even one lost sheep.
That he has named us
and we are his.

We are not the only sheep in the pen,
and not one of us
is more important than the other
but not one of us
is less important either.

Jesus will lead, if we will but follow,
into pastures and banquets
that will delight and sustain us
even when we encounter
loss and death and valleys of despair.

Jesus is the good shepherd
who comforts and provides,
guards and leads,
calls and searches
always for his sheep.

He laid down his life for us,
that we might always
know his voice, and follow

and live abundantly.