



These first few Sundays following Easter Day, could each carry their own title, based on the Gospel lesson which is always assigned to be read on these days: the first Sunday following Easter could be “Doubting Thomas Sunday”; the second, “Breaking Bread Sunday”; and today, “Good Shepherd Sunday,” because the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is always read and the Gospel lesson for all three years of the lectionary carry the Good Shepherd theme.

As is often the case, what is not included or fully explained in our readings may be of great, perhaps even utmost, importance in our hearing and understanding what is going on in these lessons.

For instance, in Acts, a lame man has been healed, and Peter and John have been hauled before some sort of ecclesiastical court to explain why, and how, and by what authority the lame man is not still lame. And our Gospel narrative begins way back in Chapter 8 where Jesus is accused of being possessed by a demon, and continues into Chapter 9 when he heals the blind man by the Pool of Siloam, before our reading picks up in Chapter 10.

Then comes one of the great “I AM” passages: “I am the good shepherd;” which we hear a portion of this morning, and which ends in verses beyond where our lesson ends with these words: “There was again a great division among the people because of these words. Many of them said, ‘He has a demon and is mad; why listen to him?’ Others said, ‘These are not the saying of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”

In this passage we hear what is perhaps the central question of faith: “Why listen to him?”

So, I ask you this morning: Why listen to Jesus? Just why do we listen to Jesus at all?

There are, after all, lots of other voices competing for our attention. Network and cable news networks, reality shows, singing competitions, dance competitions, “Law & Order” on three channels simultaneously, not to mention the commercial advertising that makes all this television possible in the first place.

Then there are the politicians of all stripes: the president and his surrogates issuing “important announcements” and speeches almost daily, not to mention those members of the Congress who are constantly, it seems, on the election circuit; mayors and governors all demanding we listen to them, while their opponents on city councils and state legislators are crying, “Don’t listen to them, listen to me!”

Corporate interests such as big coal and big oil insist that there is no global warming, and that the environment is just fine, and would actually be improved if we could find a way to use even more fossil fuels. And then there are the investments schemes, weight reductions schemes, this-can-only-be-purchased-on-TV-and-only-in-the-next-five-minutes infomercials, all the way down to the ads for Pocket Fisherman or Clap-On-Clap-Off, and 24-hour shopping channels designed to take even more money out of our already empty pockets.

There are family members unhappy with the larger family, neighbors unhappy with the neighborhood, immigrants seeking just some shred of dignity, talk-show hosts who know it all, and of course every lay person, deacon, priest, and bishop trying to convince us that they know what is best for the Church!

Like those in the end of the Gospel story, and those in the Acts of the Apostles, who are offended by what Jesus says and does, there are all these competing interests and voices trying to get us to turn away from Jesus and turn our lives over to them instead.

Lord: You have spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me! Lord: I know you want me to listen to you! Lord: If you are listening for just one minute, even just for one second of one minute, can you please shut out all the competing voices, interests, merchants, politicians, and commentators for just a few minutes of silence? Lord: Can

you please still the waters? Can you please make me lie down in green pastures? Can your rod and your staff please, Lord, comfort me, touch me, protect me, and heal me? Lord: Please give me the time, the place, and the space to listen to you!

When we look and listen to the shrill voices that surround us on all sides every day, we begin to know the plight of the one who gave us the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. And if we are paying any attention at all, we will stop, and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us each by name. We will stop . . . and we will listen for Jesus . . . And what we will hear - if we are listening closely - is just two words: "I am."

For people of faith, for people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, those are the only two words we need to hear: "I am."

Jesus says, "I am." The people of God have heard these words before. Standing barefoot, in front of a bush that burns and is not consumed, we hear a voice and we ask, like Moses, and like the caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland, "Who are you?" The answer comes back, "I am who I am. . . . I am what I will be. . . . Just tell them I AM sent you."

The one who says "I am" also says, "I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for my sheep."

Let's pause for just a moment and understand what is being said here. We are known. . . . We. Are. Known. . . . Deep down, we all want nothing more than to be known. We spend a lifetime looking for relationships, reflecting on experiences, searching for someone who knows us, or even more fundamentally, to know ourselves. There is no doubt about it, one of the most fundamental aspects of the human condition is this: a desire to know, and to be known.

All these other voices competing for our attention do not really want to know us. Can't possibly know us. But there is One who does. The One who says, "I am," wants to know us. In fact, the One who says, "I am," already knows us - just as the Father knows him.

God knows us. Each and every one of us. And in that loving relationship of being intimately known, we know God. If we really let ourselves hear what Jesus is saying, we can come to know God. Not a lot of propositions about God, not complicated theological explanations about God – not things of

the head, but things of the heart - we can know and feel and experience the reality that is God.

This depth of intimacy may frighten us. But such fear is not mere emotion or sentiment; rather, it manifests itself in a way of life, as the First Letter of John speaks about it – a way of life that shows we respect the majesty and power of the God who says, “I am.” A life that ought to “lay down its life for another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

And not just in what we do, but in who we are.

For all those who listen to Jesus – the shepherd who becomes the suffering and slain Paschal lamb to save us from our sins – we are the sheep of his pasture. We are poor sheep like those he tends and leads beside still waters. We become his people, his Body and Blood for the world. We are sheep turned to shepherds through the mystery of the breaking of the bread.

The one hope is that as folks come to know us, they find not just us, the sheep turned to shepherds, but find the Shepherd, the true Shepherd, the Good Shepherd. Through us, the world finds God in Christ.

In us and through us, the world will find and come to know Him, the One who calls them each by name. It will be so if we abide in Him and He in us. It will be so if we let him set our hearts on fire with the breath of his Holy Spirit. It will be so as he opens our hearts to the Word of God. The lame will walk, the blind will see, if when he calls us by name we will only listen.

There are many competing voices. Why listen to Him? Because, only one voice knows us by name. Because, only one voice speaks the great, “I am.” Because, that voice is Jesus Christ, who saves us from our sins, who invites us into eternal life, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.