

John 10:22-30

Today Jesus is walking through Solomon's Porch during the festival of dedication or...Chanukah. This place is important; it was the porch on the east side of the Temple that was known as the "Porch of Judgment." It is here that the King would exercise justice for his people. And here Jesus is strolling through this historic location, physically symbolizing God's justice right here.

And into this setting comes a question about Jesus' identity..."Hey, are you really the Messiah. By this time Jesus is probably tired of this question.

In the ancient world mystics and prophets would point to a God connected to the ordinary world in which people lived. These people called attention to the extraordinary in the mist of the ordinary!

And like I said last week, back then people looked for God in a vertical system of hierarchy...and there was Jesus, God, right there in front of them...calling as a shepherd throughout the ages for people to hear God's voice in the noises all around them. ...and here God was once again hiding in plain sight.

In the ancient world (and the not so ancient world) folks looked at a flat world view. God up there...we are here in the middle on this flat earth and that place no one wants to go to - down there!

And in Jesus' time these were physically real places...Hades was a physical place and God or the god's lived up on mountain tops...up there! Our churches and our western religions still bear out this idea in many ways...look at our steeples they physically point up to where God is supposed to be.

But today while every single statistic shows church on the decline something very interesting is going on. Half of American's are reporting mystical experiences and some spiritual connection with The Divine...or whatever they choose to call it.

God not somewhere else but right here among us...hiding in plain sight!
People hearing the shepherd's voice regardless of their religious practices.

See Jesus gave us permission to not need a set of rules or an institution to have a relationship with God...a God who's present with us...if we would just stop, look and listen.

Notice it's the shepherd, the outsider who spends time in nature, who spends time in the silence to better gain this growing awareness of God. You know Moses, the greatest Jew to ever live never went to a synagogue, he grew up worshipping Egyptian gods and married into the priesthood of a pagan god's family. Yet it was in the wilderness while watching over his father's sheep that he comes face to face with the living God...who was there all along.

Seeing and hearing the call of God in the wilderness...where the engine of creation can be more readily seen.

Do you think Jesus is tired of hearing these folks continually doubt and question His identity? Jesus performed miracles and healed the sick and the dying. Yet once again they want more proof...only to then question the proof. And when Jesus displays His power then they question if his power is really from God. Doubt seems to be constant companion to our faith.

Many of us here experience doubt. Especially doubt in overcoming difficult situations...we doubt organizations and people and we doubt God may even show up or be real.

Doubt and questioning are normal parts of what it means to be human.

When we acknowledge that reality right here in this church then we too give permission to people of faith to admit that doubting is OK! We are here to empower you to claim your own journeys...and your own experiences with the Divine!

So often in church we talk about faith, but not to talk about doubt means we are not leaving room for the real-life experiences of people...especially when people are in pain or going through life challenges.

See everyone has doubts. It's one thing to talk about God... it's one thing to believe in God...but it is always the experience of God that we are always striving for.

According to the statistics half of you here...and probably more since you are here in a church...have experienced God in some extraordinary way in your lifetime. And I'll bet the rest of you probably experienced God as well but perhaps couldn't quite put your finger on it or describe it.

It was my first God Talk ever about 13 years ago, when a young women showed up. As was my custom I would always ask folks why they were there and what they were hoping to get out of our conversations. She looked at me very solemnly and said, "I just wanna know God". It kinda broke my heart and then I remembered she just had a baby...she was a new mom...so I asked her to remember after the blood, the pain, the mess, the doubt and the fear...I asked her to remember and describe for me the first time she held her son in her arms...and all mom's know this.

That experience when time stands still, that joy that bursts the heart open, that feeling of connectedness so deep that there are no words adequately describe it...so she tried to describe that feeling to me...then I said: we come here to talk about and to learn more about God...but you...you actually experienced God...you already know God!

See part of my own ministry has been to help people heighten their awareness that God is all around us and that all of life is sacred and holy...if we could just stop long enough to sense and experience God with us in our midst.

That feeling of being connected, that feeling of being one with the universe, (for the Jews that's the word – Shalom) ...Those moments when time stands still are all times when we are hearing our shepherd's voice...it many times happens in nature or when we are connecting with another at a deeper level...like childbirth.

Sometimes we can feel all alone on this journey. Especially when our bodies fail us, when we see suffering in the world, or when we are tossed about by the worries of this life. Job, Bills, Activities, School, we can easily forget why we do all these things in the first place...see it's never really been about obtaining wealth or possessions...in fact they will NEVER satisfy us! A recent article I read puts the number at around \$70K...beyond that we just turtle up, hoard our stuff and think mainly of ourselves...we get selfish.

It's about discovering your purpose and meaning along the way. Mark Twain said it best when he said the two most important dates in your life are the day you were born...and the day you find out why.

...and my friends I'm here to tell you, you're never alone on this journey... you are being led and protected, the first time was by your mom and your parents, then by your friends, teachers, and mentors, and lastly and always by your creator. You are never, ever alone!

And Jesus is saying much the same thing. He is telling the doubters that He is one with God, that He knows his followers, and that they know Him. He is continuing a strand of teaching from earlier in the chapter. He is using the same vivid image of sheep to describe his followers from the Good Shepherd passage. And He is declaring that He knows all who follow him... and that they know Him for who He is...the Messiah...the embodiment of God in the flesh!

Jesus wants us to Hear His voice, He wants us to understand that He is there WITH us. He wants us to trust and to know beyond a doubt that He IS our shepherd. And He wants us to follow Him! His words of peace and comfort are always there throughout our lives but sometimes you and I may have a difficult time hearing.

On a crowded city sidewalk. Suddenly a man remarks, "Listen to the lovely sound of that cricket," But the other man could not hear the sound. He asks how can you hear the sound of a cricket over the roar of this traffic and noise? The first man, who was a zoologist, had trained himself to hear the sounds of nature.

He didn't explain this to the man in words how he could hear the cricket, but instead, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a coin and bounced it onto the sidewalk, and they watched intently as a dozen people began to look down for the coin as they heard it clanking around amid the sounds of the traffic and the sounds of the crowded city.

He turned and said, "We hear what it is we listen for." And as any mother can tell you they can hear the cry of their child amidst any other noises even when they are asleep! We hear what we listen for...we find what we seek.

And maybe that is our problem...we hear everything else but Jesus because we aren't really listening for or looking for God...or maybe we've given up or doubt that God will even show up in our lives.

The Jews heard, but did not believe. They saw all the signs, but didn't get the message. We too have heard and witnessed God in our lives... we too have experienced resurrection in our lives, but do we know that?

In his book, *A Turtle on the Fencepost*, Allen Emery tells of a night he spent on the Texas plains with an actual shepherd who was watching over his two thousand sheep. The shepherd prepared a large bonfire for cooking and warmth. The sheep dogs lay down near the fire as the stars filled the sky.

Suddenly Emery heard the wail of coyotes. The dogs weren't patrolling at the moment, and the coyotes seemed to know it. Rising quickly, the shepherd tossed some logs on the fire; and in this light, Emery looked out at the sheep and saw thousands of little lights.

Emery writes, "I realized that these were reflections of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. In the midst of very real danger, the sheep were not looking out into the darkness but were keeping their eyes on the shepherd."

Many here have known hard times: who hasn't been afflicted with illness or lost loved ones... who has been addicted to something...who is right now experiencing pain and suffering, who feels vulnerable right now in their current circumstances.

Yet despite the pain, and the blood, and the mess...something good happens here...

During these times, if we look to the shepherd, we will come to see and experience God right here in our midst! So, keep your eyes and ears open for our Shepherd my friends...especially in times of doubt and fear.

Welcome to the fold - our church... we are called to listen to our shepherd and to bring our shepherd's message of love and hope into this noisy, distracted, bloody, messy world...bringing the good news that God is right here seeking you all...especially those who have become lost or disoriented by what the world has thrown at you.

Listen to the shepherd who knows the path...who knows our journey and our purpose...a shepherd who provides just what we need a shepherd who leads me to green pastures and who leads me besides still waters.

A shepherd who revives my life and guides me along the best path for it...and when we come to the valleys and desserts in our lives...in our times of doubt and fear... the shepherd will be right there besides us comforting us in times of danger or trouble.

For when we come to know our good shepherd we will come to have peace all the days of our lives...because my friends we will come to experience God in our lives... we will come to see more easily the extraordinary right there in the ordinary...For we are all standing on Holy ground...we are all in the presence of the living God and so we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

Shalom my friends on this Happy and Blessed Mother's Day!

Your faithful servant,

carmen