



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: April 26, 2009

On Knowing the Shepherd, Robert B. Culp

Psalm 23; John 10: 11-18

A couple of weeks ago, a middle-aged Scottish spinster ... with untamed hair, a plain-spoken manner, and who lives alone with her cat ... captivated millions of music lovers and confounded celebrity watchers with her rise to fame after appearing in a British TV talent show. So it was that Susan Boyle, at age 47, became one of the world's hottest celebrities virtually overnight, after her rendition of "I Dreamed a Dream" from "Les Misérables." Since then, she has appeared on Larry King Live and has been featured in countless newspaper and Internet articles. And I understand the clip of her song has been viewed more than 20 million times on YouTube.

Susan Boyle's story reminded me of another wonderful tale that involves the 23rd Psalm. There was once a great actor, who was asked at a country gathering to recite the 23rd Psalm. With great drama and flair, he mounted the stage and artfully articulated the vivid imagery of this familiar psalm. The people were entertained, but they were not moved. Later, in the same program, an elderly lady was asked to make some kind of contribution to the evening. She apologized, and explained that she could think of nothing else to do but to recite the 23rd Psalm, the portion of Scripture she knew best. Her voice cracked as she started, "The Lord is my shepherd ..." She stumbled over many of the words, and the people had to strain to hear her low, uncultured voice. Yet, when she was finished, there were few dry eyes in the audience.

At that point, the great actor climbed back up onto the stage, hugged the woman, and expressed his conviction about what had made the difference: "I know the Psalm," he said, "but she knows the Shepherd."

This morning's Scripture lessons are all about our knowing the Shepherd, and the Shepherd's knowing us. And such "knowing" has more to do with the heart than with the head. In our modern world of agribusiness, with electronic fences and computerized chips keeping track of cattle and sheep, this scriptural image of the Shepherd seems to be a dusty antique of the past. The picture we do have is often romanticized and emotionally simplistic. The countryside around Jerusalem where the post-exilic writer would have sung the Psalm, and where Jesus would have painted his word picture, was dry, dangerous, and dreary. The rocky soil was a haven for hungry wolves and a trap for unsteady sheep, and steep cliffs fell precipitously to the Dead Sea below. So it was that good shepherds with their staffs of comfort and rods of rescue had to be vigilant, courageous, tender, and tough.

Of greatest importance, in all the confusion and danger of those rough plains, was that they had to intentionally work at knowing their sheep, and making sure their sheep knew them. It was their voice that built that

relationship. It was their voice that shaped and nurtured and protected their flock. It was their voice that drew the lost, the scared, and the wounded back home. In using this homespun image to define the purpose of his life and ministry, Jesus simply says: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

One of the symptoms of schizophrenia, a devastating form of mental illness that breaks and confuses the human spirit, is hearing voices – loud, demanding, confusing, seductive voices that pull apart the sanity of the centered soul. In many ways, we are living today in a schizophrenic culture. We are bombarded every day with voices that are demanding, analyzing, projecting, pleading, persuading, and seeking to control our hearts and our minds. For ours is a noisy and verbose culture, a culture that clutters the airwaves and the printed page with countless images and accusations. Usually, I only listen to talk shows when I’m driving to and from hospital visits or meetings. As one vociferous opinion follows another, I am always amazed that people have the time to listen, much less call in, to these shows – spending great amounts of time pontificating about minutia.

The question for us today, as Christians who follow Jesus, is which and where is the voice of God? In the midst of this confusing cacophony of noise, how do we recognize the particular tone and timbre of our Shepherd, calling us to the gracious safety of spiritual wholeness? How do we sift through the voices in our heads and our hearts, listening to the one Voice that matters, so that we can become centered in wholeness, so that we can defend ourselves from the splintering cries of our surrounding culture and personal whims and fancies?

If we look at the 23rd Psalm with fresh eyes and attentive ears, we may hear some new nuances of meaning. The verbs alone help us to understand how God works and what God says in our lives. The presence, the voice of the Shepherd leads, comforts, restores, anoints, prepares, and sometimes ... when we are recalcitrant and stubborn ... makes us rest. These are all nurturing images, images that empower and encourage – giving to us the freedom and responsibility to grow and stretch and move toward wholeness. The Shepherd does not drag us or pull us or violate us in order to get his way or force us into his image. Instead, the Shepherd’s voice invites and waits and walks by our side.

But where are the places where this Voice is the strongest?

The 23rd Psalm indicates that the first place is beside the still waters – where the sheep are made to lie down in green pastures. It is interesting to me that this is the first, and not the last place that we hear the Shepherd’s voice. Rest and restoration of the soul is not the last place the Shepherd leads us, but the place where growth in our creativity can begin. As the writer of Revelation makes clear, these still waters are also “living waters,” the place where God’s Spirit can fill us and sustain us for the journey of life ahead. And yet, how often do we respond to all the pushing, demanding, driving, and judging voices in our lives first ... and thereby fail to hear God’s still, small voice that invites us to rest and restoration, to solitude and centering?

In one of the stories concerning the Desert Fathers, a wise elder requests his novice to bring a bowl of water from a desert pool. When the younger monk returns, they sit together and watch the murky liquid gradually become clear as the sediment settles at the bottom. The elder monk says, “Your own life has been like that turbid water. But if you enter the silence with God, your heart will become clean like this water. And you will be able to reflect God who can only be seen and known by the pure in heart.”

Indeed. The voice of God is that voice, amidst all the hectic noise of our world, which urges us, leads us, and sometimes with physical manifestations makes us lie down to rest, in green pastures, beside the still waters.

But that is never where we stay. Because the voice of the Shepherd also leads us to right paths, paths of righteousness, to straight paths that take us home. With all the rocks and caves and wolves luring the sheep in dangerous directions, it is only the familiar voice of the Shepherd that can redirect them – us – toward the moral righteousness and spiritual wholeness and ultimate safety of home.

Some years ago in an interview on NPR, Edward Scheverdnaze – the former Soviet bureaucrat who emerged later as a compassionate and tireless shepherd of the struggling Russian Republic of Georgia – talked about how he learned the hard way as to how communism doesn't work. He said that the corruption and rigidity, as well as the heartless vision of undemocratic socialism, did not touch the needs or unleash the creativity or celebrate the spirit of the Georgian people. So he became instrumental in resisting and ultimately helping to bring down the communist empire.

After perestroika, he felt called to go back to Georgia and lead his country on the straight path, the right path, toward freedom and democracy, which he did as its leader for a few years. He found his work as the shepherd of the fragile flock in his country very difficult and dangerous and discouraging. But he never gave up. And, at the age of 67, he was baptized into the Christian Church, literally throwing off the old and robing himself in the new, immersing himself in the living waters of Christianity, and attuning his ear to the only Voice that can lead him and his people on paths of righteousness toward freedom, toward home ... a never-ending journey, to be sure.

For it is a journey we ourselves experience every time we hear that Voice and seek to do what is right, no matter the cost, amidst the daily pushes and pulls of life ... at home, at the office, in our relationships, and in our everyday decisions that literally can spell the difference between light and darkness, between wholeness and brokenness, between life and death. When I consider the personal involvements of many of you in attending the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our society ... whether in feeding the hungry, visiting those who are homebound, embracing a child at the Den for Grieving Kids, serving as an advocate for the powerless ... mine has been the privilege of witnessing God's people on precious paths of righteousness

We know that we are hearing the voice of God when we find ourselves resting by still waters, and when we feel ourselves moving on straight paths of righteousness. But we know there is one more place where we hear the Shepherd's Voice, perhaps the place we need to hear that voice the most, and that place is in the valley of deepest shadows, the valley where hurt and despair and death can threaten to overcome us.

We can be sure that God is with us in that valley, and that the Voice will always be able to sustain us and encourage us, because God in Christ has been there. Our Lord knows and understands and feels the dislocating uncertainties and fears of the valley. But as the Apostle Paul tells us, we can be absolutely convinced that God will never leave us there, that God will always come into whatever valley of shadows may be ours and, as the Good Shepherd, call us ... find us ... and carry us home.

Sue Monk Kidd tells the story of a young man who had lost his job and didn't know which way to turn. He went to see an old preacher and paced about the preacher's study, ranting about his job loss, and then talking about other losses in his life – his father's death at an early age, his mother's addiction difficulties that had forced him into a foster home, the dark clouds of depression that enveloped him from time to time. Clenching his fist, he shouted, "I've begged God to say something to help me. Tell me, preacher, why doesn't God answer?"

The old preacher who sat across the room, spoke something in reply, something so hushed it was indis-

tinguishable. The young man stepped across the room, and asked, “What did you say?” The preacher repeated himself, but again in a tone as soft, barely audible. So the young man moved closer until he was leaning on the preacher’s chair. “Sorry,” he said, “I still didn’t hear you.”

Whereupon the young man moved even closer, and with their heads nearly touching, the old preacher spoke once more. “God sometimes speaks in whispers, so that we will move closer to hear.” And this time the young man heard.

Our faith proclaims that amidst all the voices, there is a Voice – making us to lie down by still waters, leading us with vision and grace on paths of righteousness, and walking with us even in the darkest valleys of our living. We must listen, though. And in this listening, we must learn, and we must follow. For that is our hope, and that is our calling.