

**“My Sheep Hear My Voice”**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C  
John 10:22-30

Muppy. Fritzzy. Sandy.

Who were they? They were the three Schnauzer dogs that belonged to a man I admired. His name was Bishop Sullivan, the spiritual leader of the Diocese of Richmond. Well over 15 years ago, I lived with Bishop Sullivan at the Cathedral here in Richmond, Virginia. Which meant that I also lived with his three schnauzers.

May I tell you a secret? They were the most *hateful dogs to ever walk on God’s green earth!* They barked... all the time. They barked when they got up – at 4:55 AM every morning. They barked when the phone rang. They barked when someone came to the door.

They jumped up on the furniture. They jumped up on people. If I left a laundry basket full of clothes on the floor, I’d come home to find my shirts all over the house – with holes in them where the dogs had chewed on them like a toy.

This was my experience with Muppy, Fritzzy, and Sandy. Or, as I preferred to call them: *Lucifer, Satan and Beelzebub!*

I wanted to *punish* those dogs...but since they belonged to my boss - the bishop! - I could not do anything that would leave a ‘visible scar.’ So I came up with a plan....

I had already noticed that every afternoon, at exactly 4:30, Bishop Sullivan would walk across the street from the office to the house. He’d put the key in the door. He’d walk in, and he would yell out, “Oh, Hi guys!” (He had a very recognizable voice – one that was easy to imitate!)

So when the bishop said “Hi guys!” the three dogs would come running from all over the house. They barked with delight. They were so glad to see Bishop Sullivan, and he would give them a doggie treat. They loved it!

So I developed my plan. One afternoon, at 4:15, I put *my* key in the door....just like the bishop.... And then, *I* said the magic words: “Oh, hi guys!”...just like the bishop.

And the three dogs came running. They barked with joy as they ran down the steps. They turned the corner, and then....they stopped....utterly confused. They looked at me like, “You’re not the right person!” (It was wonderful!)

I stepped into the cloak room and whispered, “I’m in here, guys!” They came running

again...then froze when they saw it was me. (I was in heaven!)

I went into the kitchen. The floor had just been waxed. I yelled, "I'm out here guys." They came running. They got half way into the kitchen. Then they tried to stop, but the floor was so slippery that Lucifer, Satan and Beelzebub crashed into the cabinets. (It was excellent!)

For the next two weeks, at 4:15 I opened the front door, and did my best bishop Sullivan impersonation. The dogs came running. They ended up confused. I was getting my revenge on the dogs who ate my shirts!

And then, in about the third week, something changed. At exactly 4:15 I opened the door and said, "Oh, high guys." And.....nothing happened. I said it again. Nothing. So I walked into the living room. There they were – the three hateful schnauzers, asleep on the floor. Ten minutes later, the bishop came through the door. He called out to them with exactly the same words... and they went running.

And I realized – the dogs had figured out how to tell the difference between *my* voice, and the *bishop's* voice. For a while, my *imitation* was close enough to confuse them, but then they figured out how to listen carefully enough so that they could tell the difference between their master's voice, and the voice of the terrible young priest who was trying to confuse them.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

We are in the 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John's Gospel, which is full of statements by Jesus about those who hear and recognize his voice. What does Jesus say in this chapter? He says:

+ The good shepherd will lead his sheep. They will hear his voice. They will follow because they recognize his voice.

+ The sheep who are in the flock of the good shepherd do not follow strangers, because they do not recognize the stranger's voice

+ Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know mine, and mine know me. They will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd."

And all of this is summarized in what Jesus says in today's passage: "My sheep hear my voice... and they follow me."

Jesus *is* the shepherd, the leader, the master. We are his sheep, valued members of his flock, the ones entrusted to his care. How will we know how to follow? Jesus said it: his sheep "*hear his voice*."

In that one line there is a promise, and a challenge. The *promise* is this – Jesus *promises* to speak

to us. Christ did NOT burst forth from the tomb so that he could stay silent. He did not rise from the dead to abandon us or go far from us.

Our shepherd knows that we have questions, that we desire guidance and truth. Our shepherd knows how easily we become lost. Christ *is* the ‘word of everlasting life!’ His voice *is* at work in our world. If we listen, and follow, then our lives here on earth will have direction and purpose, and we will live forever.

That’s the promise.

And the challenge is this: there are imitators, deceivers, out there that try to take the place of the master. There are many voices in our world, clamoring for our attention, making demands of us, extending empty promises to us.

There are imitators, calling you down the wrong path. There are strangers at the door of your life, trying to deceive you. We’ve got to know how to tell the difference between the authentic voice of the Lord, and all of the other imitations out there. If we don’t, we’ll end up crashing into the cabinets.

Now, the ability to *hear* the voice of the Lord takes practice, and work, on our part. For instance, most of the people I know who are serious about prayer rarely say that they ‘hear voices.’ Rather, God nudges us, guides us, answers us, through intuitions that come while we pray... thoughts that persist... a sense of peace that fills us when we consider one option over others.

Then, we can test those personal, prayerful intuitions to see if they are congruent with the truth of the Scriptures, the collected wisdom of the Christian community, the insights of the saints, and advice that comes from people we know who *actually* pray. That’s how the shepherd’s voice often comes to us.

After 25 years of ministry, I still feel like a beginner at prayer. There is so much more learn about the Lord that I love. There is so much depth to the mystery of God. I stand humbly before that mystery.

But I have begun to notice a few patterns – patterns which help me discern whether I am hearing the voice the Lord, or whether the message is coming from somewhere else. What have I learned?

+ If the voice you hear encourages you to trust...then it’s probably the Lord. If the voice you hear leads you to cynicism, then it’s probably an imposter.

+ If the voice you hear calls you to be generous and self-transcending, then it’s from the Lord. If the voice calls you to selfishness, self-centeredness, it’s an imposter.

+ If the voice you hear calls you to be faithful, to be true to your word, to keep your promises, it's from the Lord. If the voice invites you to break your promise and lie, it's probably an imposter.

+ If you hear an invitation to spend more of your life focused on others, to measure your success by the difference you make in someone *else's* life, it's probably from the Lord.

+ If the voice you hear calls you to be a peacemaker, a justice-doer, a hope-giver, it's from the Lord.

+ If you hear an encouragement to treasure life, set aside angers, forgive and forgive some more, it's from the Lord.

+ If the voice you hear tells you that you are deeply loved by the eternal God, if the voice you hear tells you that you have a dignity that no one can take away from you, if you hear a reminder that that Jesus loved you so much that he was willing to die for you...then that voice is from the Lord. But if the voice you hear tells you that you're not worth it, that there is no hope for you... It's a lie, from a Liar.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. My sheep hear my voice. I lay down my life for them." He laid down his life *for you*. That's how much he loves you. And in our daily struggle to know what's right and do what's right, the best thing that we can do is to pray, which means...listen.

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