

“The Voice”

I remember, as a young teenager, thinking that when I was struggling with a particular problem and desired an answer from God, I could just randomly open my Bible and whatever words caught my eye, those were the words I needed to hear. Of course this worked sometimes but most of the time it didn't because no matter how appropriate or inappropriate the words may have seemed at the time, usually I was just reading them out of context.

Context is important isn't it? When we only get a couple of statements or even a few words, we can easily create something in our minds that takes on a whole new meaning. This happens more than we may realize and I think it's because we are constantly exposed to so much information. A sound bite here, a message alert there—we are always processing snippets of information but rarely get the whole story. And no doubt, a lot of this is media driven. A controversial quote, even one taken out of context, gets people's attention. This happens a lot in political reporting.

Mitt Romney, for example, during the 2012 presidential election was quoted as saying in a CNN interview with Soledad O'Brien, “I'm not concerned about the very poor.” He did say it and it did end up hurting him but the quote actually was part of a larger statement. Here's what he actually said— “This is a time people are worried. They're frightened. They want someone who they have confidence in. And I believe I will be able to instill that confidence in the American people. And, by the way, I'm in this race because I care about Americans. *I'm not concerned about the very poor. We have a safety net there. If it needs repair, I'll fix it.* "I'm not concerned about the very rich, they're doing just fine. I'm concerned about the very heart of the America, the 90, 95 percent of Americans who right now are struggling and I'll continue to take that message across the nation.”

So in the context of the entire statement, the sentence, “I'm not concerned about the very poor,” takes on a whole new meaning doesn't it?

The reason I bring all this up this morning is because of our Gospel lesson from John. Don't get me wrong. These are some beautiful and comforting words but do you know the context of the conversation? Probably not I would guess, at least not without opening a bible and reading a preceding chapter or two. I think the context here matters a lot because if we just bounce around to the “good parts” or the parts we are familiar

with, we can miss the entire meaning and thrust of what Christ was getting at here, especially with the imagery of shepherds, thieves, doors, and pastures.

Here's what I mean. How many of you heard this lesson and immediately thought of blindness or darkness? Not many I assume but that's one of main things I think Christ was getting at with this lesson. This is where knowing the full context really helps in our understanding.

So before moving forward, we back up. The entire preceding chapter of John is all about Jesus healing the man who was born blind and the Pharisees getting all out of whack because he was healed on the Sabbath. The chapter ends with the once-blind man seeing Jesus- physically and spiritually-for who he really was and the Pharisees being condemned as blind fools for failing to recognize or acknowledge the truth before their very eyes.

Then we get to our reading today and hear all this interesting stuff about shepherds, thieves, pastures, and gates. And as wonderful as these words are, most of us today in our modern society have very little to connect them with. I know I don't have that much experience with the ins and outs of sheep herding, unless of course you count being the father of five as that type of experience. It sounds like a nice peaceful job. Flip to the front cover of our bulletin and you see this nice sheep family, the green pasture- but I don't think this was the picture Jesus was trying to paint, at least not initially with his words in our reading today. But that's where we naturally go without the proper context. And when we go there, apart from the entire conversation, we have some nice words of wisdom. Words like *he calls his own sheep by name*, but they're kind of floating around not really tied to anything. But what happens when we look at this section of John in the proper context?

Jesus stressed the safe confines of the pen or sheepfold and he stressed that safety especially in the darkness of night. As I understand it, the sheep were usually led out to pasture during the day, but during the night, they were brought to the safety of the pen, where they had a guard or gatekeeper. That person was entrusted by the shepherd with the job of keeping watch over the flock during the hours of darkness. This is why the thief doesn't go strolling through the front door in broad daylight but sneaks in another way trying in to get his hands on the flock.

And that's the thing. The thief has to get his hands on the sheep in order to steal them because the sheep know the voice of their shepherd. Faithful sheep simply won't

follow anyone else. And this is even more important in the dark, which is why the shepherd calls out to his sheep. They know his voice. They can't see him, but they still know him and trust him. We see this same thing with our own children. Isn't it amazing how our kids know the voice of mom and dad, even before they enter into the world? This has been made even more apparent in my house over the last few months. Our baby, Phoebe, even in the darkness of night knows my wife's voice (mine as well on occasion), and responds. She doesn't have to see us, question who we are, and then decide. She simply knows the voice and trusts what she hears.

This is where the context of the entire conversation becomes so important for us today. Remember: Jesus is talking with a former blind man and couple of nosy Pharisees. The blind man, living in darkness, heard the voice of his shepherd and responded. He didn't trust his eyes or his perceptions of how things were supposed to be. He trusted what he heard. The Pharisees, on the other hand knew what God's Word said about the Messiah. In spite of this they were still living in the darkness trying to lead the people to God without going through the door that is Christ Jesus.

And when you think about it, nothing much has changed has it? We still live in a dark world filled with know-it-all pharisees as well as those who know nothing at all and could care less but still manage to have tremendous influence on our lives of faith. And yes, we still have those thieves trying to get in the pen and take us away from our Shepherd don't we? Those thieves who condemn and shun a Biblical world-view as stupid and uninformed. The thieves of secularism and post-modernism. In fact, I saw just the other day a story on a new TV channel getting ready to launch by an Atheist group that will be dedicated to godlessness. AtheistTV, according to article, will be launching this summer with big plans to influence "folks who are looking for a way out of faith." The channel's official spokesman said their goal is to "fill in the gaps of knowledge that pastors have left behind."

That's why we need the entire context of this lesson today. The truth is Christ is still calling out to his sheep in our darkness to be on guard because the thieves of this world are still at work, seeking to steal us away. And his desire is that we actually listen and trust his words of truth. His desire is for us to be in his Church, as we are today, gathered around his word and sacrament. And most importantly for all of us, his desire is for us to hear and trust his voice of forgiveness given to us by his death and resurrection, which in his own words enables us to "have life and have it abundantly."

You know, sometimes just flipping to a page in the Bible can give us what we need from God and that's OK. But on those days you have some time, or on those days you just need more, I encourage you to go a little deeper. Connect those verses of Scripture that may be familiar to you to the larger context of the whole story. I can assure you that over time it will only make his voice a little more clear and your faithfulness to it even stronger. Because the thieves will continue to strike in the darkness and we must continue to be on guard.

No matter what may be going on in your life, listen to his voice above all others. Our Shepherd, Jesus Christ is calling and leading each one of us into that everlasting pasture of heaven. May we all hear his voice follow it to life eternal. Amen.