

What a coincidence to have this reading this afternoon....

Right across the street, we are having Sheep to Shawl!

**At one o'clock the sheep will be led from the pastures to the shearing stations,
so if you would like to head over...after chapel!....I get it.**

It is very entertaining and informative....

Those of us non-farming people...

**who just drive by and see all the lambs and sheep
grazing on the corner of 131st and Southwest highway
tend to have a very sweet opinion of sheep.**

**Sheep aren't very courageous, that's why there are donkeys and llamas out there
with them: those animals help to protect the sheep from predators.**

**But the people listening to Jesus so long ago
would know a lot about sheep...**

and they would have a much less romantic view of them.

Sheep weren't just pretty sights to behold,

**but they were raised for a purpose.. for all sorts of things that helped the people to survive
such as food and clothing.**

**Interestingly, shepherds were not respected back then
because often left their families unprotected while tending their flocks.**

They could not follow Temple laws...

**and, to be honest, they very often didn't feel the need to follow any other laws
way out there in the countryside....**

So, this reading, while it seems lovely to us

would have very much confused the ancient peoples listening to Jesus...

and the evangelist even tells us that...

So what is Jesus trying to teach with his so called 'figure of speech'

Well...once again, there are many threads that one could follow...

but for today I would like to explore this one:

"He goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They will not follow a stranger,

but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

How do we know which voice to follow? which voice to run from?

How do we know which leader to support? which one to ignore?

How do we know path to take...and which one to avoid...

It can't be as simple as "Well...just believe in Jesus and you'll be ok"

because we all know that there have been deadly cult leaders

taking advantage of people, all in the name of Jesus...

remember Jim Jones and Jonestown?

So there must be some discernment, some wisdom,

some attentive deep listening going on that will help us choose

the right leader, the right path, even if or when they use the name of Jesus...

If you were with us last week, you heard me speak of 'the burning in our hearts'

that signals the presence of the Holy....

As we make our choices and our decisions we must take the time to listen deeply...

But what are we 'listening for'? and still how do we learn to trust what we 'hear'?

Now, I'm not going to say that I've got all the answers in this regards

or even that this gospel reading is giving us those answers...

but I think I can share with you two guiding suggestions,

that you probably already know, but they are always good to talk about:

First of all:

Is there any fear involved in this decision?

Now...there's a difference between fear and caution.

caution is sometimes or perhaps even often... necessary...

but caution and fear are two different things...

And there are different kinds of fear.

Michael Wiggins, our pathway to sobriety director often says:

Fear might be a great...and sometimes necessary....beginning motivator...

but in the big picture, in the long run, it will never lead you to health or healing...

The kind of fear that I am speaking about today says to us:

if I don't do what they say I'll be kicked out of the group...

if I don't do what they say or believe what they say

I'll never amount to much,

I'll punished forever...whatever...

any language that is used to make you feel less than...

or to make you afraid

is a red flag! Tread very carefully if you decide to continue...

Jesus constantly said: "Do not be afraid."

Anytime you feel the tug, the burning, the itch deep inside...stop, breathe

and pay attention. What are you feeling? If you decide it is fear...explore it.

where in your body are you feeling it?

Name the fear...and then make your decision

Second guiding suggestion:

Is the person or the suggestion building you up?

Making you feel better, authentically better, about yourself?

Not the superficial "gee whiz, kid you're great!" kind of compliment.

**Not a 'my compliments to the chef' before the first bite kind of compliment.
Those are not beneficial or trustworthy...**

**True leaders, people who are worth your life's energy
build you up...they do not take you down....
Those are the people and choices you ought to consider following...**

So how does all of this fit in our reflection today?

**Some religious leaders do use fear to get you to follow their teachings...
we all know that.**

Jesus never did.

**Some religious leaders affirm the Presence of the Holy in you...
Perhaps it is covered up to a greater or lesser extent...
we are limited human beings!
but true religious leaders reassure you that it is there...
They reassure you that you are loved always, by the Holy One of the Cosmos...
Those are the religious leaders that are entering through the gate...
those are the ones that we ought to consider following...**

**So the next time you see a video of a person inviting you to follow
their thinking and their teachings...
pause, breathe...check in with yourself...
are you feeling fear? Do you feel worse about yourself?
or do they build you up...do they help you to feel better about yourself, warts and all?
Listen closely and you will know which voice to follow...
and you will then be able to whisper 'thank you'...amen.**

