

**“Hearing and Following”**  
**Rev. Michelle Madsen-Bibeau**  
**May 12, 2019**  
**Good Shepherd Sunday**  
**First Congregational Church of Haddam**  
**Higganum Congregational Church**

**John 10:27-30**

*“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.”*”

I once or twice cleaned up after a goat at a friend's house as a kid (as it were), but I've never had anything more than petting zoo experience with sheep, so I turned to the Internet this week to learn more about the idea of us as sheep who hear and follow Christ the Good Shepherd.

I discovered that sheep do have good hearing, and that they can be trained to respond to their names.

I read that groups of four or more will show “flocking behavior,” which appears to mean moving as a group. As a “pastor,” one who shepherds, that was encouraging, though used to Baptists and now Congregationalists as I am, Christians with the reputation of having at least five opinions for every four people, I admit I am a little skeptical.

I learned sheep will follow a leader, one of their own or a shepherd, and a bit about why that might be important:

- there are several plants that are poisonous to sheep we'd want them to avoid;
- they're good at controlling both invasive plant species and insects, but partly because the shape of their faces make them prone to eating pasture too close to the ground, so both their own long-term wellbeing and that of the surrounding ecology depends on them moving;
- and they can have some challenges with their vision and balance depending on the terrain, which a shepherd's guidance could address.

Most interesting to me was that sheep have been demonstrated to recognize individual human faces, even after years.

With these things now in my mind, I turned to our passage, all ready to explore “sheeping.”

And there I discovered, that other than “hearing and following,” our verses along with the rest of the more extended discussion in John's Gospel of which they are a part say next to nothing about the sheep. These verses are almost entirely about The Shepherd.

**It is the Shepherd who knows the sheep.**  
**It is the Shepherd who calls them by name.**  
**It is the Shepherd who goes ahead.**

**It is the Shepherd who lays down his own life.**  
**It is the Shepherd who holds the sheep such that they cannot be snatched away.**  
**It is the Shepherd who gives eternal life.**

It is, and should be, humbling. *“All we like sheep,”* as Handel has us sing in his Messiah quoting Isaiah, *“have gone astray, and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

We don't want to need shepherding. We don't want to admit how often and easily we chow down on things that destroy us. We are busy, busy, reshaping our pastureland, and we dislike to pause and take stock of the desolation our industriousness causes. We think we see clearly and can stand on our own four, er rather two feet

So it can almost be against our will that we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. Hear him speak our name. We can pretend not to hear for years and still recognize Him as the one our heart calls us to follow.

If you have a chance, look up Shrek, Sheila, Shaun, Cecil, Big Ben, or Chris, all sheep that became world famous for hiding out during shearing until their own wool's weight actually endangered and incapacitated them. Chris is the current Guinness record holder, shorn of a more-than-89-pound fleece after being discovered wandering in Canberra, Australia.

The accretions that weigh us down can accumulate slowly, but there are moments of clarity when we fall to our knees and realize we do need the ministrations of the Good Shepherd. Guidance back to safe ground. A way back into community. Healing. A lighten-ing of our load of self, or sin, or worry, or suffering.

And in these moments, we once again hear... and so can follow the voice of God. It may not even be a change in direction that others notice, though if that's the case we've wasted an opportunity to invite the rest of our kind to flock with us to the one they too need.

In a moment, I'm going to invite us to speak the part of the sheep, to say together the words of the 23rd Psalm. As I said before, this day, Mother's Day, can be a difficult day for many reasons.

If you have a wonderful mother, I encourage you to think of the ways she has been safety and guidance and joy to you, and to hear in the words of the Psalm an affirmation of the way of the one 14th-century mystic Julian of Norwich called “Mother Jesus.”

Julian was the first woman to write a book in English, “Revelations of Divine Love,” which recounts a series of visions that she experienced between May 8th and 13th in the year 1373, and which includes her most famous saying, “All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.”

If your relationship with your mother, or with mothering, is more complicated, and particularly if this day is one of grief for you, I invite you to hear the words of Psalm 23 as we so often do at funerals and memorial services: as a reminder that no matter what, no matter what, God our

Good Shepherd is with you. You are precious to the one who made you and will never forsake you, who holds you so that you can never be taken away.

**The Lord our Shepherd knows us.**

**The Lord our Shepherd calls us by name.**

**The Lord our Shepherd goes ahead of us.**

**The Lord our Shepherd lays down his life for us.**

**The Lord our Shepherd gives us eternal life.**

Amen.

Let us stand and say together the Shepherd Psalm as an affirmation of our faith.