

“Voice Recognition”

“When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep will follow him because they know his voice.”

“Alexa, play ‘Born to Run.’”

If you have every spoken these words, it may indicate two things about you:

1. You may be from New Jersey.
2. You are using voice recognition technology.

Voice recognition technology is increasingly becoming a regular part of our lives. It may be defined as *“the ability of a machine or program to receive and interpret dictation or to understand spoken commands ... voice recognition systems let consumers interact with technology simply by speaking to it, enabling hands-free requests, reminders, and other simple tasks.”* (Alexander S. Gillis). Voice recognition technology can assist us in finding out the latest news and weather, play our favourite music, or look up information through online encyclopedias; it can also be used to write letters or essays without the use of a keyboard. For many consumers, speaking to Alexa or Siri has become as common as speaking with a member of the family or a close friend.

While voice recognition technology is relatively new, the ability to recognize voices is as old as civilization itself. We recognize our native language when we are in a crowd of people speaking multiple tongues; while many of these other languages are not recognizable to us, hearing our own language cuts through clearly. As babies, we learn to recognize the voices of our parents and close family members above the voices of others. Before Caller ID gave us information on who was calling us on the phone, recognizing a familiar voice before the person identified themselves meant that this was a person with whom we had an especially close relationship. Among all the voices we may hear, there are certain voices we immediately recognize as the voices of the people we love, the people we trust, the people whose words we know will guide us and be a blessing to us.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” when we focus on one of the most familiar and beloved images of God in the Bible. We hear the words of Psalm 23, in which God’s people confess their faith in the one who they trust and follow: “*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*” Another beloved Psalm calls on the people of God to “*make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth ... Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*” (Psalm 100:1-3). We remember that in the Old Testament “shepherd” was a word used to describe the kings of Israel, those who were entrusted with being the faithful leaders of God’s people. Unfortunately, most of these shepherd/kings proved untrustworthy, unreliable, or corrupt; after chastising these unfaithful shepherds through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord announces that God will be the one who will be the true shepherd who will faithfully guide and care for the sheep that are the beloved people of God:

- “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among the scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak” – Ezekiel 34:11-16.

Jesus uses this image of a faithful shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep in one of his parables in Luke, in which the shepherd seeks out the one lost sheep out of the 100 in his care, and calls together his friends and neighbours when the sheep is found and invites them to “*rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost*” (Luke 15:6). It is one of three parables in which Jesus teaches about the steadfast, tenacious love of God that will not rest until all who have been lost are found and rejoices when those who have been missing are returned safely to the fold.

It is not surprising, then, that in the Gospel of John one of the ways in which Jesus identifies himself is as the “good shepherd,” one of many “I am” statements in the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus uses common images to define who he is as the one who is the Messiah, the incarnate Word of God. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus describes what it means for him to be the loving, trustworthy shepherd of God’s people in response to the conflict in which he has been engaged with the Pharisees, who had objected to Jesus’ healing of the man who was born blind and who Jesus had chastised because “*if you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.*” (John 9:41). Jesus’ words at the beginning of our

Gospel lesson, “*very truly, I tell you*” (10:1), serve two rhetorical functions: they mark a shift from dialogue to monologue (as happened in his conversation with Nicodemus: “*Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do now receive our testimony.*” – 3:11), and it indicates a new movement in the argument (as when Jesus says to the crowds who are following him after his feeding of the multitudes “*very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.*” – 6:26). Instead of addressing the Pharisees’ situation directly, Jesus now addresses it more obliquely through his use of figurative language centered on the image of the shepherd. The identity of this shepherd is established by first establishing who he is not:

- “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice.” – 10:1-3a.

The pivot of this antithesis is the way one enters the sheepfold. The one who has “authorized access,” who enters by the gate, is the shepherd; the one without such authorized access is a “thief and a bandit,” which suggests a desire to exploit the sheep for personal benefit. Unlike the thief and robber, the one with proper access to the sheep, who “*enters by the gate,*” is the true shepherd. The gatekeeper gives the shepherd access to the sheep as the Father has given the disciples to Jesus:

- “What the Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” – 10:29.
- “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They are yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.” – 17:6.

The fact that the shepherd has authorized access is confirmed by the gatekeeper’s opening the gate for him; the gatekeeper opens the gate through which the shepherd leads out his sheep to the pasture of eternal life: “*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.*” (10:27-28).

Jesus’ teaching on the identity of the true shepherd expands from the distinction between shepherds and bandits to the sheep’s recognition and response to the one they recognize as their shepherd. The intimacy of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is demonstrated by the sheep’s ability to recognize the shepherd’s voice and the shepherd’s ability to call “his own” by name:

- “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, 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.” – 10:3b-5.

As a result of this intimacy, the sheep will follow the shepherd, a description of a true disciple as one who hears and follows Jesus’ revelatory word: “*Whoever is from God hears the words of God*” (8:47). As the sheep will follow the voice of the one they recognize as their true shepherd, they will refuse to respond to the voice of a stranger which may be a potential threat to the sheep. The sheep have only one shepherd and are single-minded in their devotion and attractiveness to him; “*they do not listen to any other leader because no other knows them as their shepherd does*” (Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV).

The Evangelist interrupts Jesus’ teaching so that his audience may understand that Jesus’ words are meant to be understood as more than a depiction of Palestinian pastoral practices: “*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*” (10:6). “Figure of speech” is a term that in the Bible ordinarily means “proverb” or “wise saying”:

- “Be ready to listen to every godly discourse, and let no wise proverbs escape you.” – Sirach 6:35.
- “Do not slight the discourse of sages, but busy yourself with their maxims; because from them you will learn discipline and how to serve princes.” – Sirach 8:8.
- “It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘The dog turns back to its own vomit,’ and ‘the sow is washed only to wallow in the mud.’” – 2 Peter 2:22.

In the Fourth Gospel, “figure of speech” designates figurative or veiled speech which may not be immediately understood (“*I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father.*” – 16:25). In interrupting Jesus’ teaching on the true shepherd, John is drawing the reader’s attention to Jesus’ use of language whose meaning intentionally lies below the surface (“*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*” – 12:24). The Evangelist also informs his audience that the Pharisees do not understand what Jesus is saying. While shepherd imagery is common in the Old Testament, their conduct toward the blind man whose sight had been restored to him by Jesus demonstrates that they do not have the flock’s best

interests at heart, whereas Jesus; conduct toward the man has shown him to be the shepherd who comes to the sheep (*“Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’”* – 9:35) and to whom the sheep respond (*“He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him.”* – 9:38). *“It is this use of pastoral imagery that the Pharisees did not understand, because as the teachers and leaders of Israel, they would think of themselves in the role of shepherd, not thief of stranger.”* (Gail O’Day).

The Evangelist resumes his account of Jesus’ teaching; *“very truly, I tell you”* indicates a new development in the discourse. When Jesus identifies himself as *“the gate for the sheep,”* he points to the ways in which one’s place in the sheepfold, and hence one’s identity as a member of the flock, is determined exclusively by one’s relationship to Jesus as the gate; *“one enters the fold through Jesus”* (O’Day). Those who enter the fold by ways other than the gate are *“thieves and bandits,”* this refers to those like the leaders who discount these witnesses to Jesus and thus attempt another means of access to the sheepfold:

- *“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”* – 5:39-40.
- *“They reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciples, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’”* – 9:28-29.

But despite their nefarious attempts to divert the sheep from following the true shepherd, *“the sheep will not listen to them”* (10:8). The sheep will not listen to them because they have not entered through the gate and thus do not belong to the fold.

Jesus again explicitly identifies himself as the means of salvation when he proclaims that *“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”* (10:9). This verse incorporates Old Testament imagery in its description of Jesus as the gate. The promise of entering through the gate to find salvation echoes Psalm 118:19-20 and identifies Jesus as the point of access to God for the flock:

- *“Open for me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.”*

The promise of finding pasture recalls the pastoral imagery in the Psalms (“*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters*” – Psalm 23:2) and in Ezekiel (“*I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.*” – Ezekiel 34:14). Jesus’ promise of pasture also recalls his earlier promises of gifts of water and bread that will end thirst and hunger:

- “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let anyone who believes in me drink.” – 7:37-38.
- “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” – 6:35.

In his teaching in 1521 on what one is to look for in the Gospels, Martin Luther states that “*Christ declares that he is the gate by which one must enter, and whoever enters by him, to him the gatekeeper (the Holy Spirit) opens in order that he might find pasture and blessedness.*” As the sheep will not follow the voice of the thief and bandit who come “*only to steal and kill and destroy,*” those who recognize the voice of their true shepherd will follow the one who “*came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*” (10:10). As the shepherd guides the sheep to places that will bring them all that is needed so that they might enjoy abundant living, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who guides his people to the abundant life that is God’s Will for all people through our Lord and Saviour:

- “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” – 3:16.
- “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” – 11:25.
- “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” – 20:31.

It is no accident that the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the most beloved for generations of Christians. There are numerous depictions of our Lord lovingly caring for the sheep (including in our sanctuary and chapel); numerous churches, hospitals, and social service agencies are named for the Good Shepherd; and Psalm 23 ranks next to the Lord’s Prayer as the most-frequently memorized passages of Scripture. But we are also reminded that in proclaiming that “*the LORD*

is my shepherd,” we are proclaiming that we place our trust and confidence in God alone and forsake any other voices that would seek out allegiance, false shepherds who would have us follow them. It means we recognize the voice of Jesus through God’s Holy Word that has been taught us, the Word of God that is the Word of eternal life, the voice of our loving shepherd that we recognize and follow because it is always *“a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”* (Psalm 119:105). As at baptism we renounce allegiance to any other voices that would draw us away from the voice of our Good Shepherd (*“the devil and all the forces that defy God ... the powers of this world that rebel against God ... the ways of sin that draw you from God.”* – ELW Holy Baptism), we do not follow the voices that we know do not have our best interests at heart but follow the voice we recognize as the voice of light and love, the voice of our Good Shepherd who will lead us throughout all the days of our life and unto eternal life when our Saviour *“comes again and will lead you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also”* (14:3).

- “The Good Shepherd ‘calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.’ They follow him ‘because they know his voice.’ What you call a person by name, that means that you care something for that person as a person. And nothing less than this is a true reflection of the way God looks at people ... every human being is unique and uniquely precious.” – Lesslie Newbigin.

As voice recognition technology works when the program or device identifies the voice to which it is programmed to respond, those who follow Jesus as the Good Shepherd know that his voice is the one to follow, because his voice is the Word of the one who loves the sheep so much that he lays down his life for those he calls to follow him. We recognize in Jesus the voice of the one who leads us lovingly through all of life’s challenges, the one who will never abandon or forsake us, the one who will guide even through life’s darkest valleys, and the one who will gather his sheep together into our eternal home. Of all the voices calling for our attention and allegiance, may we strive to recognize and follow the one voice that speaks God’s Word: as God’s people and the sheep of his pasture, may we follow the voice we recognize as our Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.