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"Hearing Jesus' voice - and knowing it's him

A rather revealing video has three youngish millennials yelling at a flock of nibbling sheep to get their attention. But the sheep show no interest at all, and keep nibbling, heads down. When the shepherd then appears and calls to the sheep, their heads immediately rise, nibbling stops, and the sheep come running to him.

These sheep aren't dumb at all. They know the voice of their shepherd when they hear it, and respond only to him. And that's hugely important because they depend on their shepherd for a constant supply of food and protection.

And it's that analogy that Jesus uses in John 10 to describe his sheep - those who look to him as their shepherd to provide them with food and protection. And it has much to do with hearing and knowing his voice, verses 3 and 4: "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his sheep by name...and his sheep follow him, for they know his voice."

But how do sheep come to know their shepherd's voice? By the shepherd talking to them, in a language all his own. It could be a loud sing-song voice, or weird animal sounds, or a "strange laughing call" as one observer put it, but the sheep take notice, because every word their shepherd speaks to them is for their benefit.

And isn't that the reason Jesus gives for following him and listening to his voice too, when he says in verse 10, "I have come that my sheep may have life, and have it to the full"?

Take into account that "life to the full" for sheep in first century Palestine meant surviving very nicely on little tufts of grass poking up through the rocks in the desert wilderness, because that was the only place sheep were allowed to roam and eat. But a good shepherd knew where those tufts of grass were, and his sheep could get their fill of them every day. And in having to follow their shepherd closely for those precious tufts, it meant he was close by to protect them too. So even though life for both sheep and shepherd seemed tough in a desert wilderness, in the hands of a good shepherd it worked brilliantly in meeting the sheep's needs "to the full."

And that's the promise we have for trusting in Jesus as our shepherd and hearing his voice. But how do we know it's his voice we're hearing, and not the voice of some impostor - like the "thieves that come only to steal, kill and destroy," that Jesus talked about in verse 10?

Jesus' answer to that is in verse 14, when he says "I know my sheep and my sheep know me" - and both points are extremely important in the relationship between sheep and their shepherd.

For a shepherd to "know his sheep" he has to know each sheep's personality, which he shows in the names he gives them. Sheep have a wide variety of personality types, from cute to downright ornery, so there are lots of names to choose from, like "Touchy" for the sensitive one, or "Butt head" for the bully.

And Jesus also "calls his sheep by name," verse 3. So, does he have names for us that fit our personalities too - just like we have affectionate nick names for our kids?

As parents we also adjust our treatment of each child according to his or her personality. So do good shepherds with their sheep. I watched one shepherd make sure his most hesitant sheep got its dose of food by feeding it first, which the shepherd needed to do because the bully sheep in the flock grabbed the bucket out of his hand, and even got the bucket stuck over its head.

So Jesus knows his sheep, but his sheep have come to know him too. How? According to Jesus it's by an ongoing process, which he describes in verse 9: "I am the gate, whoever enters through me will be kept safe. He will come in and go out, and find pasture." He's describing exactly what it was like for sheep in the desert hills. Every night they'd be corralled in an open space surrounded by walls with an opening at one end that had a door, or gate, through which the sheep would enter for protection at night, and then exit through to "find pasture" during the day.

Jesus says he's that door, or gate, so it's through him we constantly enter and exit for protection and "finding pasture." And the only way we come to know he'll do that for us is to trust him. Sheep have to do that with their shepherd, and so do we. And that takes time. But it's after we've experienced again and again how he keeps us safe from evil and fed on the pasture of his word that we come to know him. It's the old adage of "trust him, and see."

And Jesus guarantees he'll be a shepherd to us. We then learn by trusting him day in and day out that he is that perfect shepherd. It starts with listening to his voice, speaking to us so personally through his word, and it continues to the point we recognize his voice so well we won't be caught out by, or even take the slightest notice of, an impostor.

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