

Your True Name
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Who still has an answering machine? I used to use the answering machine to screen calls, before caller ID. You wait for the machine to answer and then you can hear if it's someone you recognize. I know some of you still have answering machines because I call you. This week, I made a couple of calls and each time, the answering machine picked up. I know now that I just need to talk long enough for the person to recognize my voice, to give them time to change their task—be it dry their hands, get up from the chair, turn around from the door as they were just about to leave. It warms my heart every time one of you says, “I recognized your voice and I came to the phone.”

I know I'm not the Good Shepherd. But, I'm learning some shepherding skills from my Good Shepherd—and I have come to love this flock that has been given to my care. And you have loved me, and I also recognize your voice. I don't need to look at the name label on the zoom screen to know your voice and call you by name.

This fourth Sunday in Eastertide is called, “Good Shepherd Sunday.” I think it is here because the resurrection on Easter Sunday launched a lot of confusion. People asked, “Did Jesus really rise from the dead?” Some got to see Jesus; most did not. Most of us have not. What does faith look like when personal certainty is not within our grasp? Are metaphors powerful enough to give us life, new life? Besides the philosophical questions, the disciples probably most wanted to ask, “What's he going to say to us when he finds us?” Will he say, “You punks! You betrayed me and left me!” Shame, embarrassment, and fear plagued them. And, so it is time to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd on this fourth Sunday in Easter. We hear the one who announces, instead of outrage at our mistakes, peace that salves the wound. “Beloved. Peace be with you. My own peace I give to you. Be not afraid.” The Good Shepherd comes to lead us in the valley, in

the shadows, in the confusion and even in death—to lead us back to the sheepfold, back home to the heart of God.

Today, I want to ponder with you how the Good Shepherd calls us by name. I also want to ponder who might that thief be, who jumps over the fence and comes to steal.

So, first, what is your true name? How might this be different from your birth name? How did your birth name come to you? Are you named after someone, after an aspiration? What are you named for? There is a series of fantasy books written in the 70s called the *Earthsea Trilogy*. In it, everything has a true name. This name is only disclosed to the most trusted because it has the power to claim you. There are other names, like use names, family names, nicknames. You might have many names, some of which are precious to you. And yet, there is your true name and this is the name by which the Good Shepherd calls you. That name is, “Beloved.” Have you ever considered that the Beloved Disciple is you and that it is a proper name? That, in fact, we all actually have the same name. “Oh, Beloved, Beloved, come to me. Your Shepherd is calling. Hear my voice, come to me. Beloved, let me show you the way the fresh green grass and the clear waters. Beloved, I will carry you through in the places of danger and despair. Beloved, I will take you to myself and bring you home. Beloved, Beloved, do you hear my voice?”

The Good Shepherd’s voice has some major competition. The Thief also has a voice. It is a sneaky voice. It does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs the fence, slinks underneath, oozes between the posts. The Thief whispers, “No, listen to me. You know it can’t be that easy. You’re too smart to just accept love. I mean, why would you be so capable, so smart, so good, if these traits aren’t standards for you and everyone else to live up to. Or, maybe it is because you aren’t capable enough, smart enough, good enough. Maybe you’re not worthy of love and respect. No one likes a hypocrite.”

Oh the Thief. The Thief is the collective voice of all our psychic injuries, passed down the generations. It will use everything at its disposal: charm, threat, and cunning. All it says is intended to deter us from following the voice of the Shepherd. It confuses us so much that we don't know what voice to trust—and our distrust is enough for the Thief. Because without trust, there is no love. And that is why the Good Shepherd puts his body between the Beloved and the Thief. The Good Shepherd even gives his life, defending the sheep from the one who would speak words that tear, devour, and maim. The Good Shepherd would go to hell to bring us back. Oh, Beloved.

So, Beloved, how do we hear his voice among all the voices? We need silence and we need discernment. The Thief voice is a busy voice, constantly stirring up the dust so that we can't breathe or see. You must go to a still point and discern in that quiet place what deep in your heart is your trust. I remember one time someone very close to me said something so cruel to me, it took my breath away. I could see they enjoyed it. I remember going into a room and shutting the door. I took several breaths and I asked, "Who do I know that I am?" I repeated this till I got quiet, "Who do I know that I am?" I remember saying something like, "That was a passing blow. I do not have to be damaged by it. I belong to God. I know who I am. Beloved."

The voice of the Shepherd is always the one that beckons with love. The Thief shoves, bullies, whines, and entices. Today, train your ears, listen to the one voice with your one true name, "Beloved." And let all other voices diminish in strength. It will be like standing in a crowded city, with the honking of cars, the hammering of constructions, the yelling of people, and finding the only thing that has your attention is the liquid song of the house finch in the tree at the end of the block. And you follow it till you find it and let its delight sing through you.