

Covenant Word

The Shepherd's Flute

Psalm 23; I Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
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Have you ever had that experience where a piece of a song...some phrase, some little melody...stays stuck in your head so that it runs round and round, coming to the forefront of your thoughts when you least expect it? You might catch yourself humming it in the grocery store, or you sing it in the shower, or when you think no one is listening, you may just burst forth, singing with gusto this little ditty that will just not die?

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

I have a friend in Atlanta who emails me occasionally. Rarely does he write to tell me how he is doing or to ask how I am doing. Instead, being plagued by some hymn or anthem he heard in church, he will send me what he can remember, and we play "Name That Tune" until we get it settled in his mind.

I wonder if we live so fast...so full of insignificant things...so busy with distractions that we mistake or totally miss the sound of the Master's call.

But when we are quiet and still, we can hear the shepherd's flute playing. ... It calls us to come home to the shepherd...

My South Carolina sister says that if I will just sing the song all the way to its ending, I will be able to move the tune right on out of my head. This rarely works. A friend advises that I should turn on the radio to fill my head with other music so that the bit that nags at me will be chased out of my consciousness. This is usually not successful either. I find that what works best is to be quiet and still and listen for what that measure or two of music is trying to tell me.

Adela Rogers St. John was a popular columnist beginning in the 1920's. She was the preferred interviewer for the Hearsts, actresses like Joan Crawford and the prince and princess of Monte Carlo. She lived a glamorous life that was characterized by living in the fast lane. In her autobiography, The Honeycomb, she writes with bits and pieces of stories. Her clipped sentences and snippets of phrases point to the disjointed and hectically paced life she lived. In fact, one afternoon, full of gin, Adela took a police car and tried to drive it home through the traffic of New

York City. She wakes in an ambulance with the EMT's talking over her. "What's she talking about?" the driver asked. "She says she wants to cover the Sermon on the Mount," the intern said. "She must be delirious." Adela says: "I knew my voice wasn't coming through, but I wanted to cover the greatest news story of all time. Then. There was silence. I felt myself in silence. A desperate longing took possession of me. ...In the silence, I knew that God is and that He loves me. I don't see how He can but He does and that is grace. Anyone can know. Seek, it says, and ye shall find. Seek!"

They say that when multiple flocks of sheep gather at the watering place, all it takes is the shepherd's signature call to make the sheep move out to follow the shepherd's lead. Some cluck of the tongue---the call of a name---the trill of the shepherd's flute and the sheep fall into line behind the shepherd. Like Adela Rogers St. John, I wonder if we live so fast...so full of insignificant things...so busy with distractions that we mistake or totally miss the sound of the Master's call.

But when we are quiet and still, we can hear the shepherd's flute playing. It is a tune that sometimes haunts us. But it is also calls to us about God's care and concern, God's conviction and comfort. It calls us to come home to the shepherd; it calls us to come home to the flock; and it calls us to service in the world.

(The first line of "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need" is played by a flutist.)

The scripture for today presents many visual images of the roles

that Jesus plays. In the gospel passage, He clearly identifies that He is the good shepherd, but He also says that He is the gate by which the sheep go in and go out.

Now gates do a lot of things. Some hold us in. Some keep danger out. Some mark a clear and distinct boundary. As gates go, Jesus is an odd choice. If he keeps any out, it's those that everyone thought were locked in, like the religious zealot and the chief priest. If he keeps any in, it's those that everyone assumes cannot get in, like a Samaritan, or the Roman official, or a woman caught in adultery. (William Malhambri, "Liberated by the Gate," Pulpit Resource, April 13, 2008)

As strange as his choices are about who gets inside his gate and who stays without, I am grateful that he is the gate. I do not want to be the one that makes these choices. The history of the church is littered with gate-keeping battles. It is baggage that haunts



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us still. So I am perfectly satisfied, even though it is sometimes uncomfortable, to be a part of a flock that listens for the shepherd's call. We come in and we go out, always moving to green pastures and still waters...to wherever there is abundant life. The rhythm speaks of loving God and serving the world. We live in both realms with the hope that those outside the gate will follow us home.

Philip Simmons is a blacksmith whose specialty is gate making. (Catching the Fire, Mary E. Lyons) So beautifully adorned and proportioned are his gates of wrought iron that the Historic

Charleston Foundation has begun to catalogue every piece of Simon's work. Beginning as a smithy when he was 13, Philip Simmons gradually developed his skills to equal any artist's. His gates have birds, snakes, hearts, harps, even hammers and wheelbarrows worked into the designs.

Tourists stop daily at his small cottage in an East Charleston neighborhood. "Look at all I have," he says of his simple house and his family and friends. "I have everything I need." When he is asked questions about the secret to his successful life, he replies with: "Every morning, when you get up, you get down on your knees to pray, pray, pray. But after you pray, you got to get up so you can go, go, go." (Told to Susan and Joe Palmer)

A faithful member of St. John's Reformed Episcopal Church, Philip Simmons let it be known that any child who was active in the church and aspired to attend college, he would personally make sure that they went. Opening the gate to higher learning, Philip Simmons has sent 20 youth to college.

When I think of Jesus as the gatekeeper, a similar image comes to mind. A gate beautifully designed that is wide enough to allow us all entrance, for as sheep, we are often skittish and dirty, hungry and frightened. Visits and re-visits with the shepherd are needed for clarity and comfort. This gate is secure and strong enough to keep thieves and bandits outside if necessary. Yet it is never permanently closed. It opens and shuts to allow us access to a world that needs a hopeful message, encourages dreams and provides an example of community at its very best.

(The second line of "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need" is played by a flutist.)

While at Mountain Brook High School, I happened to be chosen to sing in a group that was simply called "The Ensemble." It was made up of 12 persons, and in addition to school concerts, we were often allowed to check out of school in order to sing for Garden Clubs and Senior Adult events. There was a standard of excellence set by previous Ensembles, in that every year, the Ensemble had made perfect scores at the regional and state competitions. So every day in fifth period, Mrs. Francis Manly challenged us with music. We worked diligently on one particular piece, "Now Is the Month of Maying." It was full of syncopated rhythms, unusual phrasing and demanding entrances. We breezed through local competition and then at state, we gathered in a choir room on the University of

Alabama's campus with our judge. The judge watched as Mrs. Manly played and directed from the piano. We did not dare take our eyes off of our director.

When we finished, the judge asked if she could try an experiment. She turned us around, rearranged us, and then told us to close our eyes. She gave us our pitches and then counted out an introduction so that we were expected to sing without the benefit of that familiar voice in our ear and without the security of having our leader

before us to give us direction. We made it through the song and Mrs. Manly told us later, we all stood perfectly still except for our heads which were beating out the rhythm together so that we could feel the music inside of us leading us through the song. It was a testimony to the preparation our leader had given us.

I was reminded of this experience as I watched the documentary "Dancemaker." (This idea was given to me in The Rev. Canon Carol L. Wade's sermon, "The Voice of the Shepherd" preached at The Washington National Cathedral) It tells the story of renowned modern dance choreographer, Paul Taylor. Taylor began his career with modern dance legend, Martha Graham, and is known as much for his own ability as a dancer as his choreography and company. In this film, he and his company are invited to India for a command performance to premiere a new work.

When the dancers rehearse with Taylor, they first listen to the music. Then they spontaneously improvise seeking the best steps to be worked into the performance. The rehearsals are long and arduous. They are marked with blood, sweat and tears. Injuries occur. Close attention is given to diet and hydration. The dancers obviously understand the paradoxical truth that without discipline there can be no freedom to dance. Their dedication symbolizes their love for the art, and their love is reflected in their discipline. The ability to trust something so implicitly that one can leave home, change lifestyles and priorities is quite remarkable. The dancers are like the disciples in that way: they leave their lives for the discipline of their great love of dance.

Finally, the troupe arrives in India and the night of their performance arrives. The theatre is abuzz. The house lights dim to black, and the curtain goes up. The music begins to fill the theatre, and the dancers begin to dance. The driving rhythm of the music intensifies, and the dancers give their bodies over to the music.

As the audience delights in the movements, all of a sudden, the music stops. The soundtrack has gone dead.

The camera quickly cuts back stage. The stage manager is frantic. She pushes all the buttons on her console trying to figure out why there is no music. As she begins to talk through her headset to the other technicians, the camera begins to show the stage again. Even though there is no sound, the dancers are still dancing. They do not stop. They keep going without a trace of

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fear or concern. And even though there is no music, they still dance because they know the music so intimately. It lives on inside of them individually and as a group.

Meanwhile, the stage manager has gotten the thumbs up from the technicians that they have solved the problem. The music can be restored, but just before the stage manager presses the play button, she realizes that to begin it where they left off is not where the dancers currently are in the dance. That is when she remembers the back up tape player that has been running off of batteries the entire time. They make an electrical patch so that when the music resumes, the dancers have not missed a beat. They are in perfect step with one another and with the music. The crowd goes wild!

To know the voice of the Shepherd, to recognize the call that is given from the Shepherd's flute, is like these dancers and singers who knew their

music so well that no matter what was happening around them, nothing could throw them off. The same is true for us as followers of Christ's. The call of the shepherd's voice is what propels us out of the gate and into the world in order to love others as Jesus loves them and nothing should

throw us off course. Diane Butler Bass describes it as participating in "the great dance wherein mercy and justice clasp hands, and the universe moves in rhythm to God's intention for creation." (Christianity for the Rest of Us, p. 173)

(The third line of "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need" is played by a flutist.)

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the post-resurrection story this way: *On the night before Christ died, all of His sheep fell asleep.* (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Shepherd's Flute," Bread of Angels) *They had had a big meal and with the sound of the shepherd's flute in their ears, they fell asleep. And as they slept, they shared a terrible dream: of wolves with clubs and torches who came out of the woods, led their shepherd away, and tore him to shreds on a hillside outside of town.*

In the dream, they huddled for safety, unable to think, unable to move, and they stayed that way for three whole days, wondering if they would starve to death before the wolves came back to finish the job. But then on the third day, they heard a flute—far away at first, then drawing nearer—that woke them from their sleep, and they stood once again in the presence of their good shepherd.

Everything was the same again, but everything had changed. Looking around at each other, they saw what had happened. They had fallen asleep as sheep, but they had woken up as shepherds. As they slept, every one of them had been changed

into the image of their master, and as they stood there staring at one another he handed them staves like his, and flutes, and sent them out to gather their own flocks. "Do for them as I did for you," he said, and played them a little tune as they set off to do just that.

As post resurrection believers, it is true that we do not have the benefit of the Good Shepherd's physical presence with us, but I believe that when we profess faith in Him, some of that same resurrection power stirs within us to transform us into shepherds of a sort. It haunts and nags and comforts us, sort of like a melody that runs in and out and around our souls reminding us whose we are and that there are sheep that need tending.

(The fourth line of "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need" is played by a flutist.)

To know the voice of the Shepherd, to recognize the call that is given from the Shepherd's flute, is like these dancers and singers who knew their music so well that no matter what was happening around them, nothing could throw them off. ... The call of the shepherd's voice is what propels us out of the gate and into the world in order to love others as Jesus loves them and nothing should throw us off course.

<Hum the tune as you walk down in front of communion table>

I suspect that this tune will roll around in my head and heart this week, but instead of being an annoyance, I will let it serve as a reminder of my decisions of faith today:

To be still more often that I might hear the shepherd's voice calling to me
To be faithful in caring for the other sheep of the fold as well as walking through the gate to serve the world
To remember that in the Shepherd's absence, I am left to tend the flock by sharing His love and using His words to call others into the fold

What have you decided today? Perhaps you wish to make those decisions public. If you do, I will be here to welcome you as a new believer or as a new church member or as one who is giving their life over to a Christian vocation. Whatever your decision, we invite you to make it as we stand and sing, hymn #61, "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us."