

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – May 11, 2019
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

Recently, I was walking down the hallway when I saw a woman on her hands and knees picking something up off the floor. I called out, “Good morning,” but I got no reply. As I walked closer to her, I said again, “Good morning,” and I added, “Can I help you?” Again, no response. I thought it was a little odd that she should ignore me, but I just kept walking closer. When I stood right in front of her – close enough so that my shoes were within her line of sight – she stood up startled. I started to ask again if I could help her when she reached up and pulled the ear buds from her ears. She had not been ignoring me, after all. With whatever music she was listening to, she just couldn’t hear me. And because ear phones are much smaller than the large headsets that I used growing up, when I was trying to protect my parents from the assault of my stereo spinning vinyl records, I had no idea that she couldn’t hear me until she stood up. Whether she was listening to rock or Rachmaninov, opera or Opry, she was lost in her own world of sound and my voice was unable to break through.

In our gospel today, Jesus the Good Shepherd says, “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” That is a comforting image, is it not? We don’t recognize the voices of strangers, or those we hear only occasionally. We may be able to identify an accent or a speech pattern, but we probably wouldn’t be able to say for certain who is speaking unless we could see them or unless our phone told us who was calling. But we recognize the voices of our loved ones – spouse, children, brothers and sisters, dear friends, and (of course) our mother and father. We have heard their voices so often that they have become familiar to us. So when we hear their voices – either in person or on the phone, we know immediately who they are. We don’t even have to consult the caller ID. The very sound of the voices of our loved ones brings a smile to our face and joy to our heart. No matter where we are, their voices transport us to some place familiar, some place comforting. And so it is also comforting to imagine that we could be so close to Jesus as to recognize the sound of his voice. Imagine being as close to the Lord as to our own family, our dearest friends. Imagine recognizing the voice of the Lord just as many will recognize their mother’s voice when they call or skype her today.

If we heard the Good Shepherd’s voice, we tell ourselves, we would instantly follow him. Of course, none of us have actually heard his voice lately – at least with our ears – but we’re open to it. If I pick up my cell phone and it says that Jesus the Christ is calling, I will answer it. Like our gospels of the past several

weeks, if the risen Christ actually appears to me in his glorified body, displaying the wounds in his hand and in his side – well, then I’ll stand up and take notice. I will follow him when I see him or when I hear him – I promise. I suspect that you would say the same thing.

But hearing and recognizing the voice of the Lord isn’t easy. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that when we don’t hear his voice, we usually blame God. We try to listen for the voice of the Lord, we say to ourselves, but he just keeps silent. I want to hear his voice, but he just ignores me. Or maybe we ignore him. Other than once a week or so, we may give God little thought – until some crisis in our lives forces us to reach out in a hurried prayer. Then we take notice, but otherwise, well, we have too much on our plate as it is. I suggest to you that God has never stopped speaking to us, calling out to us, inviting us into a deeper relationship with him. We are the ones who have stopped listening – or, more likely, we are the ones who are too busy listening to other voices.

We are, I suggest, like that woman I happened upon in the hallway. We have the ears of our mind completely blocked by our own soundtrack. It is tough to hear the voice of the shepherd if we are too busy listening to the sounds of self-righteousness echoing in our heads. We don’t need God, we tell ourselves, we’re perfect – it is all of those other people who need to change. It is tough to hear the voice of the shepherd if we are too busy listening to the soundtrack of self-pity that keeps playing over and over in our minds. If God cared about me, we hear ourselves saying, then I wouldn’t be facing financial difficulties, health issues, family problems. Why am I so abandoned? It is tough to hear the voice of the shepherd if we are too busy listening to the cacophony of selfishness and sin that blares from contemporary society. How can the tender voice of Jesus possibly break through if all we hear are the gunfire of a culture of death, the alluring messages of temptation, the superior lectures of political correctness, the surround sound of sin that plays 24/7 in our world? Unless we remove the ear buds of this culture from our ears and our minds and our hearts, we will never be able to know the shepherd’s voice, much less be able to follow him. In this Easter season, as we try to grow closer to the risen Christ, may we open our eyes to his presence. May we open our hearts to his love. And may we open our ears to his gentle voice – even though that means separating ourselves from the myriad of other voices that try to drown out the voice of the Lord.