

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,  
on Easter 4 (Good Shepherd Sunday) 29 April 2007:  
Acts 13:15-16, 26-39; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

## The Shepherd's Call

*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me;  
and I give them eternal life.* [John 10:27]

This sermon is personal, and frankly I am a bit nervous about that. My sermons are, in this respect, always personal, but this sermon is different. This sermon is personal because I am the example that illustrates the point, and this makes me nervous – nervous for two reasons.

One is that my deepest inclination is to make it clear to you that what I do is not about me. Yet, the other reason is even more personal. What I am going to tell you is about what I have been thinking and praying and struggling with for a long time; and to make this soulfully personal stuff so explicitly public feels risky.

So, as I employ elements of my own life in an attempt to illustrate some of what I think it means to listen to the Shepherd's voice and to follow his call, I ask you to listen with a generous and faithful spirit. And, by all means, please don't laugh.

The timing of this sermon is also telling. Some of you might recall that it was eight years ago, on "the Fourth Sunday of Easter," that I gave my first sermon at St. Martin's. At that time, I was the rector-elect. Bev and I were in town, house-hunting. When the invitation arose to stay through Sunday so that I could preach and for the first time introduce myself to the congregation of St. Martin's, "Good Shepherd Sunday" seemed to be the right context and the right occasion. Added to this 1999 memory is the fact that last Thursday was my 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an ordained person in the church. When I hear that number "29", I would like to think that we are referring to a very old priest, certainly not to me. Yet, the truth is that a year from now, the Church Pension Fund will ask me if I want to retire.

I do not, not by a long shot, but the fact is that I could, which gets me to my personal point. I have been pondering a nagging question, a question that will not go away. I am (roughly speaking) two-thirds through my life. What shall I do with what remains? I am very good at what I do, and I could continue doing this for the duration with measurable success, but my point to you this morning is this.

I want to pause right now to make sure that you are listening with a generous and faithful spirit. For I am not preparing you to hear an announcement from me that I am leaving or going to quit being a priest. No, what I want to say to you is something much more subtle than any of that, something more important,

something harder than that. I trust -- and hope -- that I have twenty or so very active years left before I must step aside from what I consider to be the Shepherd's call to me. Yet, in order for me to respond to this call to "mature" personal and priestly leadership, there will be things that I need to do, things that I have not been able or willing to do to this point.

A good deal of what I am pointing out to you has to do with entering one's mid-life. I realize this, and I am not claiming any uniqueness in this whatsoever. I have often said to you that when it comes to facing one's mid-life that the main issue is this. If we are to continue to grow -- as a person, as a child of God, as a member of the Body of Christ, then we will need to face all those things we had ignored when we were younger, in hopes that they would go away.

But those things don't go away (do they?); and some people -- sadly -- simply melt down in their presence or more commonly commit themselves to fearful denial in order to stay safe with what is familiar. In terms of how this may be working in my own life now, I sense the Shepherd's call -- still, but I also know that if I am to follow that call that I will need to face those parts of my life that I am less-than-eager to confront. In truth, I have been struggling with my resistance to doing this work, to responding to the Good Shepherd's continuous call. The reason is that to do so feels an awful lot like death to me, and I am afraid.

This is the reason that I have not been more forthcoming about plans for my sabbatical. Even as far back as last November, in my Annual Report to you, I forced myself to mention that I would be taking an over-due sabbatical this year because I felt that if I made it public, you would hold me accountable. You have, and I have been struggling to follow through and to take action, as a result.

Unlike the sabbatical that I took in 1994, this one was never about going to some exotic place or taking some class or writing some long-postponed book -- all of which are things I would still like to do. No, I knew all along -- at least in my heart, if not my head -- that this sabbatical needed to help me deal with what I would be and do in this last third of my life. The fact that I was not making much traction in planning it only reflected my resistance to having to face God's call to me, not as some young, whiz-kid but as a mature man and a seasoned priest.

Would I have the faith and the courage to listen to that emerging call? Would I dare to follow where it would lead me, especially since my gut was telling me that this would be no picnic? Would I pay attention to the Shepherd's call? Could I stand to relinquish being successful for being more faithful? How much more was God asking me to do? Did I even really want to know?

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If someone were to ask me what my favorite passage of scripture is, I would not be able to answer because there are many pieces of scripture that feed me. Yet,

one of the passages that resonates most for me comes from that desperate father's encounter with Jesus. It is a story that all three synoptic gospels convey (Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-43), and it relates what happened immediately after Jesus is transfigured upon the mountaintop.

A father has heard of Jesus' healing power and has come to plead with him to heal his son. A great commotion has arisen because of the father's insistence in seeing Jesus, who (in the time line of the story) is only just re-entering the town from his Transfiguration experience. When Jesus asks what's going on, the father blurts out that his son lives in the clutches of a demon, who possesses the boy, seizing him at times into a fit, where the child writhes on the ground, foaming at the mouth, grinding his teeth and going dead-stiff.

"I brought my boy to your disciples, but they couldn't do anything to help," he says. Then, with the courage of a father in desperate and fearful need for his son, the man asked Jesus to intervene, "if you can," he adds.

"If!" Jesus blurts out. "All things are possible to him who believes." And the scriptures tell us that the father immediately cried out: "I believe; help my unbelief!"

I know that father. I know that man. I know that soulful cry. It is mine – more often than I may be able to admit. "I believe..." I surely do, or I wouldn't be here; but there is unbelief in me, too; and if I am to grow in my ability to "love" and to "serve," if I am to be able and willing to respond to the Good Shepherd's call beyond what I have already heard and done, then I will need to confront my unbelief and dare to trust God's Christ with it.

To make a start at this, I want you to know that I have taken the first step in beginning my sabbatical. I have made application to Mepkin Abbey (a place I have cherished since I arrived in South Carolina) to be accepted as a "monastic guest." The Abbey's "monastic guest" program involves spending a full month with the community, participating in all aspects of their life. I just received confirmation from the Abbey, that I will be using the month of June for this purpose. I hope that in the rhythm of that Benedictine community, as I keep the prayers, as I offer my physical labor to support the common life, as I think and study and learn from the brothers' spiritual wisdom – I hope that I might hear more clearly the Shepherd's call to me and receive the courage to follow where he leads so that I might know and trust him who calls me more and more; and rest in his life and love – no matter what.

After this first month of sabbatical, I will then try to figure out how to employ the other two months of sabbatical time. From this vantage point, I don't anticipate that this time will be taken all at once but interspersed with my normal duties and life here with you at St. Martin's. And while I am most grateful to St. Martin's for the gift of this sabbatical, let me remind you of two things.

One: This is not a vacation. Getting up at 3:00 a.m. to say prayers and eating cheese sandwiches each night for the evening meal is not my idea of a vacation! – not to mention that there are no weekend leaves or visitations, either!

The other thing I want to point out is to reiterate that listening to the Good Shepherd's call and working on follow him is not unique to me. Everyone of us is "a sheep of [Christ's] own fold, a lamb of his own flock" (to use a pertinent phrase from the Prayer Book's Burial Office). He calls each of us by name, and until and unless we listen and respond, we will not have what we need.

Scripture calls what we need "eternal life." And so it is. Each of needs to know and to take to heart that "eternal life." For God has already given to us in his risen Son, Jesus the Christ, the Good Shepherd. For if we listen and if we follow where he leads, we will find ourselves recipients of that life; and we will be free from all fear. And that, dear ones, is life, indeed.

You may not have the gift of such a sabbatical in which to listen and learn to follow with less fear, but it is work that all of us need to do, if we are to be free. It is work that is much easier to do together. And once I get a bit of a jump-start on this work, I plan on sharing it with you, as, together, we continue to establish St. Martin's as a place where eternal life is recognized and received.

For now: Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.