

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Rev. 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

## Love at First Sound\*

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Some people say that, when they fell in love, it was “love at first sight.” For me, it was love at first sound.

Let me explain. I met my husband Michael in the summer of 1991, almost exactly 25 years ago. As many of you may recall, it was quite a different world then, technology-wise. Back then, smart phones, digital tablets, and wifi didn't exist. Neither did Google, Facebook, or Amazon.com. In fact, the first web browser wasn't even invented until that very year.

Needless to say, Michael and I didn't meet online on a site such as match.com. Instead, we met through a personal ad that I had placed in the LGBT newspaper in Boston. In 1991, the cutting edge of dating technology was the ability to link a personal ad with a private voice mailbox. So if you read a personal ad in the paper that sounded interesting, you could actually leave a voicemail message for that person.

And that's what happened. Michael read my ad, and he left me a message with his phone number. I heard his message, thought he sounded cute, and called him back. We went on a first date in Harvard Square that Saturday, and we've been together ever since. Love at first sound.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, and “love at first sound” is a good way of summing up the main theme of the day. I don't know if you've noticed, but each of the Sunday gospel readings since Easter have focused on different senses. On the first week after Easter, we heard about Doubting Thomas and his need to see and touch the risen Christ. Last week, we heard about the disciples eating with the risen Christ, which focused on smell and taste.

And this week, we focus on hearing. In the Collect of the Day, we prayed that when we hear the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, we may know the one “who calleth us each by name” and “follow where he doth lead.” And in today's reading from St. John's gospel, Jesus tells the religious leaders who surround him in the Temple: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” Love at first sound.

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Now I grew up in the suburbs of San Francisco, so I never had first-hand experience with shepherds or sheep. But I have seen YouTube videos in which sheep really do know the voice of their shepherd. There's a great video in which several different people call out the exact same phrase to a flock of sheep, but the sheep only respond to the voice of their shepherd.

In fact, I've read that even when several different flocks of sheep are mixed together in a field – say, while grazing – they will actually separate out into their different flocks when they hear their own shepherds' voices calling.

In today's gospel, we hear about the religious leaders who try to get Jesus to say plainly that he is the Messiah. That way they can have him arrested for blasphemy. But Jesus refuses to fall into their trap. Jesus tells them that his works testify to him, but the religious leaders do not believe in him because they are not his sheep. "My sheep hear my voice," he says. "I know them, and they follow me."

So what is it about Jesus' voice that makes us want to hear him and to follow him? Why should we follow him, when there are so many voices – both religious and secular – that are competing for our attention in this postmodern, digital world?

For me, what makes the voice of Jesus distinctive is that he is not just the Good Shepherd, but that he is also the Lamb of God. That is, he is both shepherd and sheep. In the words of today's gradual hymn that we sang before and after the Gospel reading, Jesus is "both lamb and shepherd." He is not "either-or," but rather "both-and."

In the words of the hymn, Jesus is both a prince and a slave. He is both a peacemaker and a sword-bringer. He is clothed in the light of the Transfiguration, and yet he is stripped of his power on the cross. Jesus is both human and divine. He is both priest and sacrifice. He has died, and yet he lives.

So how can Jesus hold together all of these polarities? How can he simultaneously be all these things that are self-contradictory and diametrically opposed? The answer lies in the notion of paradox.

Paradox is a central theme for today's readings. In the reading from the Acts of Apostles, we hear about the apostle Peter's raising of Tabitha from the dead. Peter, as we know, is the first among equals, and he was given the keys to heaven by Jesus. Yet, paradoxically, Peter was also the one who denied Jesus three times and who abandoned him at the cross.

Paradox is also present in the famous Psalm 23, which is traditionally attributed to King David. Even though the psalm was written by a powerful shepherd king, the speaker of the psalm is, paradoxically, a vulnerable lamb who seeks food, water, and protection from danger.

Finally, paradox is present in the reading from the Book of Revelation. In that passage, Jesus is the sacrificial lamb who is slaughtered and whose blood cleanses the robes of the martyrs. However, Jesus is also, paradoxically, the glorious lamb who sits at the center of the throne and is worshiped as the divine shepherd.

The 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has defined paradox as “passion of thought.” According to Kierkegaard, the “thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion.” He continues: “the ultimate paradox of thought [is] to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.”

And so, we simply cannot understand the mystery of the incarnation, the resurrection, or the ascension through pure reason, logic, or intellect. Rather, we can only understand the paradox that is Christ Jesus through passion, relationship, and first-hand encounter. Or, to put it simply, through “love at first sound.”

During this Easter season in general – and on this Good Shepherd Sunday in particular – we hear Jesus’ voice, not just because he is a mighty shepherd who lords over us from on high. Rather, we hear his voice because he still carries the wounds of the crucifixion on his hands, feet, and side. Jesus understands the pain and struggles of our lives precisely because he is both shepherd and lamb.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” May these words of the risen Lord – who is both the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God – sustain us, today and always.