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Church of the Holy Spirit

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John 10:1-10

One of my favorite stories about my grandfather Tabacco Jack, my mother's father, is about a random weekday afternoon in 2016 when he called me. I answered the phone, and he didn't say hello; he just said, "Good, you aren't in jail." It turns out that someone was trying to scam him. They had called and asked him to wire bail, and while the cell reception wasn't great, he recognized that it wasn't me. It wasn't because I was a very pregnant mother of one child already and a priest in the church, but rather because the scammers had called him Grandpop, when I always called him Gramps. If it had been any of my cousins or my sisters, he may well have believed it and sent them the money, but luckily, he wasn't, and we had a good laugh.

When thinking about being led astray by thieves and bandits in relation to today's gospel and in light of current phishing attempts, where someone somewhere is impersonating me, I find myself lamenting how often human beings are taken advantage of because we are not paying attention. Halfheartedly paying attention to the world around us makes it easy to be led astray by false prophets and promises. There have been countless con artists and scammers through the millennia; it is not a 21st-century phenomenon for certain. Before and after Jesus, many have claimed to be the messiah, only to be shown by history to be frauds. Promoting vigilance against deception helps us stay rooted in truth and avoid falling prey to false teachings.

But Jesus tells the disciples that those who know his voice will not be led astray, that his sheep know him and he knows his sheep. Because Christ is known to them and the disciples, he will let them come in and go out of the fold, and their needs will be met.

It is one thing to recognize someone's voice if you have heard them teach, preach, laugh, cry, and pray day in and day out for years, like the disciples did, like the sheep of a flock do when a shepherd rears them, but how can those who have never heard Jesus of Nazareth speak know his voice?

Jesus is speaking in metaphor, and even the disciples didn't understand this lesson at first. So is it possible for 21st-century Christians to listen for the voice of our shepherd and understand what Christ says? What actions can cultivate a listening heart, a discerning mind, and ears that are attuned to the voice of Christ? Since, as far as I know, none of us has a time machine and we can't book a journey to ancient Palestine, we instead travel on the path laid out for us by the disciples and all the saints, drawing our hearts and minds towards God.

Christian lives are founded upon the principles of prayer, scripture, tradition, and practices that incline our ears to hear God’s word.

Christians who know the words of God, pray the prayers of the pious, tend to the traditions of the faithful, and participate in the sacraments speak the language of faith and can recognize and understand when language is a true profession of faith and when words are performative. The difference is like hearing a choir sing in their native tongue versus performing a piece phonetically. A discerning ear can tell the difference in tone, assuredness, and the ineffable interconnectedness of lyrics, rhythm, and melody. A piece may be technically correct, but something is just off.

When Christians abide and adopt the practices that lay a sure foundation for faith and life through the study of scripture, observance of prayer, membership in community, and partaking in the sacraments, one can suss out when there is a fox in the fold. We need to pay attention, though- like little red riding hood saying - grandmother, what big eyes you have, what a big nose you have, what big teeth you have- we need to recognize when the things that we see

are not what we expect and call those inconsistencies into question.

Yes, God is the God of surprises, and we should expect the unexpected. But a good rule of thumb when we are listening, learning, and attempting to live a loving and godly life that follows Jesus' voice and his timeless teaching is to remember, as retired Presiding Bishop Michael Curry often said, 'If it's not about Love, it's not about God.' Loving hearts will help us discern falsehood from truth and keep us rooted in faith. Thieves and Bandits do their research. They know the sheep, but the sheep don't know them, and Jesus knows that. But while the sheep know the shepherd, in their comfort and complacency, they can be led out of the safety and security of the fold. The scoundrels' intentions are to isolate the sheep one by one, targeting those least able to defend themselves.

When the scammer called my grandfather, they knew he had grandchildren old enough to be in jail, that he would help them no matter what, and that at least one of them was named Kim.

When phishing bots impersonate me, they know I am your rector and that you would respond if I asked for help.

When the false teachers start ramping up their rhetoric, they choose their words precisely to instill fear, descent, and mistrust. All this is intentionally planned to prey upon those who hold faith and hope in Christ crucified, died, and risen. The false messiahs exploit the hope their victims hold sacred, and do all they can to help their prey to be ignorant and distracted. If the sheep are only half-listening to what is said, it is more likely that they will be led astray.

It is by being aware, alert, and listening to God every day, every week, every hour that we detect false prophets. By being aware of what is happening around us, and observing when the words and actions of Satan, the most egregious of scammers, almost, but don't quite align with the words of the Savior we are protected by God from the snares of the enemy.

Be prepared, like Little Red, who questioned the Big Bad Wolf; be alert like Gramps, knowing it wasn't his pregnant priest granddaughter calling from jail; and be like all y'all who emailed me and said, "This doesn't sound like you." We lay the path for our fellow Christians in generations to come by being aware, alert, conscious, and faithful individuals who know what Jesus says, what the disciples did, and how our saintly siblings set the bar. So when someone quotes scripture or says they follow Jesus, it doesn't mean they actually do.

If it's not about Love, it's not about Christ. Keep this at the forefront of our reading, praying, contemplating, and actions, so that we can keep our hearts and minds open to the knowledge and Love of God.

Always be discerning, and look for the Love of God in the words, actions, and promises of those who claim to be a servant. Through active listening and learning about God's love, we will be more than halfway to having discerning, well-attuned hearts, minds, and souls that know Christ and who Christ likewise knows.

Through love and with love and in the knowledge of the love that God and Christ and the Spirit have for us, we remain in the fold, safely grazing, let in and let out not by a pretender, but by our one true shepherd.

Amen