

Easter4_YearA_051511_mcr

In the name of the one God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Here's a joke to start us off:

Leroy goes to the revival and listens to the preacher.

After awhile, the preacher asks anyone with needs to be prayed over to come forward.

Leroy goes up and the preacher asks, "Leroy, what do you want me to pray about for you?"

"Preacher," says Leroy, "I need you to pray for my hearing."

The preacher puts one finger in Leroy's ear and he places the other hand on top of Leroy's head and prays and prays and prays.

After a few minutes, the preacher removes his hands and stands back.

"Leroy, how is your hearing now?"

"I don't know, Reverend," says Leroy. "My hearing's not until next Wednesday."

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, otherwise known as Shepherd Sunday.

That's because every 4th Sunday of Easter, no matter whether it's liturgical year A, B or C, has a Gospel reading that is centered around one story or another where Jesus says that he is the shepherd and we are the sheep. Unlike most of the other lectionary readings, then, which are only read once every 3 years, this reading, or at least this theme, should be very familiar to all of us.

If, in fact, we do know these stories backwards and forwards, it makes it hard to find something to say as the preacher that is not something you've already heard a thousand times, and that is also relevant enough to be talking about in the first place. Well, unlike the preacher in the joke, I 'heard' something as I was preparing my sermon this week that I think might not be too far off the mark.

Some of us are old enough to remember an old TV show that started in the 50s called *This is Your Life*. The show alternated between presenting the life stories of entertainment personalities and those of 'ordinary' people who had contributed in some way to their communities, and the host, Ralph Edwards, would surprise each guest by narrating his or her biography. He would narrate while presenting the

guest with family members, friends, and others who had had an impact on his or her life.

One of the trademarks of the show was watching the honoree's reaction as each friend, family member co-worker, or other surprise guest first spoke from backstage, sight unseen. As you can imagine, when the guest finally recognized the voice of the person behind the curtain, it often became quite a tear-jerker.

Another TV show might be one that more of you will remember. It, too, began in the 50s, but it lasted into the mid-70s, and then went even longer in syndication and with other hosts and panelists. *What's My Line?* was a show in which celebrity panelists tried to guess the occupations of guests by asking yes or no questions. The host would invite the guest in by saying, "Enter and sign in please." The guest was introduced and the panel began their questioning. (A little side note, which I learned from Wikipedia: the question, "Is it bigger than a breadbox?" was popularized by Steve Allen, who first asked it on the show on January 18, 1953.)

There were usually 2 or three of these guests per show, depending on how quickly the panelists guessed their occupations. But the highlight of the show was always the last guest. He or she was usually someone from the entertainment world, and the panelists had to identify this guest by name. Obviously, even though communications were not as advanced then as they are now, where one's picture can be taken here, now, and be sent around the world in a matter of nanoseconds, these mystery guests were usually recognizable by their faces, not to mention their names.

So the panelists all put on blindfolds before the mystery guest entered; the male panelists had no-nonsense black silk ones, and the women, white silk. Dorothy Kilgallen had jewels outlining hers, and Miss Arlene Francis wore one that was outlined in some sort of fuzzy boa material. But I digress.

The mystery guest remained mysterious because the panelists could not see his or her face and could not read his or her name on the sign-in board. But what to do about the panelists' hearing? Wouldn't they recognize the guest's voice? So besides the excitement of seeing who the guest was, what came next was the pleasure of hearing how the guest disguised his voice. Alfred Hitchcock kept answering the questions in different languages, or in English but with different accents. Elizabeth Taylor answered her questions with a tiny, squeaky Southern drawl, sort of sounding like a Scarlett O'Hara who had swallowed a little bit of helium. While

the point of *This is Your Life* was to recognize someone's voice, the point of the mystery round of *What's My Line?* was to make someone's voice unrecognizable.

Now, lest I have put some of you to sleep who are firmly ensconced in the here and now, let's jump about a half a century or so to 2011. Just last month a new TV show, a so-called reality show, began called *The Voice*. There were lots of commercials on TV advertising its debut. The show is a competition in which singers sing and 4 celebrity judges choose the singers they would like to work with throughout the competition; the winner gets a record deal, etc, etc.

I don't normally watch reality shows and would not have paid any attention to this one except that the ads intrigued me. The first stage of the competition was called the blind audition. This time, there were no people standing backstage behind the curtain. There were no bejeweled, fuzzy, satin blindfolds, either.

The singers came out on stage and the judges sat in chairs, as usual, but their backs were to the singers. They had no idea what the singers looked like - whether they were black or white, short or tall, fat or thin, old or young, even male or female. They couldn't see what they were wearing, or whether or not they had any 'stage presence.' They did not know what their personalities were like.

All the judges had to go on was the sound of the voice - did it sound good to them, did they like its timbre, its pitch, its musicality? If a judge liked a particular singer, he would push a button and his chair would swivel around until he was facing the contestant. Sometimes it was obvious that the person who had been chosen did not look like the image the judge had formed in his mind while listening to the singing.

I don't know the rest of the story about the ones who were chosen to continue the competition. I did not watch. But the rest of the show apparently continues with the usual criticism and elimination, followed by tears and a goodbye song.

So what does all of this have to do with Jesus?

Well, here's what I think:

The lessons during the Great Fifty Days of Easter are all about recognizing the risen Christ. So far, we've read about Thomas, who needed to touch the wounds of Christ in order to believe; last week, it was the disciples on the way to Emmaus, who did not recognize Jesus until he broke bread and blessed wine in front of

them. In today's lesson, we (the sheep) recognize our shepherd because the shepherd calls us by name and we recognize his voice.

I can't say how many times I have heard this lesson, or preached on it, or heard someone else preach about it, but this is the FIRST time that I have heard that we know Jesus is the shepherd because we 'recognize his voice.' I've always understood that we recognize him because he calls us by name, but that did not mean the same to me as recognizing his voice.

And it made me think about those TV shows. And about how, when I hear my voice in a recording, I think it is my sister speaking. And about the fact that research shows that babies recognize their mothers' voices even in the womb. And I wonder what Jesus' voice really sounded like.

And then I wonder, if we have not known Jesus in his physical body, how would we recognize his voice? I doubt that very many of us have ever heard the voice of Jesus in any way other than figuratively.

But then I thought about how it works.

Are we not the body of Christ? We say all the time that we are to be Christ to the world. That we are the body of Christ in this day and time, precisely because Christ is not physically present in his own body. So if we are the flesh and blood that makes Christ known, are we not also the flesh and blood voice of Christ? It is our call to bind up the world's wounds, to feed the hungry, to bring dignity to those who are marginalized. It is also our mission to speak truth to power, to give voice to the voiceless ones, to call each of God's children by name so that they know who they are and whose they are.

How do we do that? Together. In community. Speaking to the hearts and minds and souls of all who will listen. And when they listen, they will hear and recognize the voice of the one who saves us all.