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Larry Kochendorfer

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## Because We Know God's Voice

Larry Kochendorfer<sup>1</sup>

### Text: John 10:1–10

How wonderful to be together. To come together to worship here in this place. To greet one another. To participate in conversation and in decision-making. And to gather under the theme: "*Because we know God's voice.*"

I first knew God's voice through my maternal grandmother's voice. She was twelve years old when she arrived with her family to western Canada from Scotland. Her voice had a musical quality—a lilt to it. You could dance to my grandmother's voice. She and my entire family called me—and continue to call me—by a special name: *Lar*. It is a name not used beyond our family. It is a name that speaks of relationship, of intimacy, of knowing, of love.

I first knew God's voice through my grandmother's voice. I grew up on a grain and livestock farm in western Canada, and I remember very clearly that treats of any kind were few and far between. My identical twin brother and I, and our three younger sisters, loved candy and ice cream—and like most children we drooled over the chocolate bars at our local grocery store.

I remember that on one particular Sunday afternoon our mother's parents had come to visit, and sometime during the visit Doug and I, who were five years old, noticed that our grandmother had a chocolate bar tucked away in the recesses of her purse. We saw her take the chocolate bar from her purse, break off a tiny square of dark, delicious chocolate, and put it in her mouth. Immediately our saliva glands kicked into gear and—although I'm pretty sure that it was my brother's idea—we both plotted as to how we could sneak some of that dark, delicious-looking chocolate without getting caught.

Throughout the afternoon we planned, and we planned, and we planned but we could not come up with a full-proof scheme—one that would get us the melt-in-your-mouth chocolate and not a spanking at the same time. We were unusually patient that day—we waited, and we waited, and we waited—and finally we thought we had the perfect opportunity! Our Grandmother had left her treasure-filled purse in our parent's bedroom just off the kitchen, and we carefully stalked the bedroom—hoping no one would spot us—our saliva glands working overtime!

We reached into the dark, mysterious recesses of her purse and pulled out our hearts' desire—the chocolate bar—thick and rich and dark. And carefully—and quickly—we each broke off a square of chocolate. The chocolate melted instantly in our mouths. It tasted so wonderful—better than we could have ever imagined. And of course, it was so good that we

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Kochendorfer is the Bishop of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories, ELCIC. This sermon was originally preached for the Opening Eucharist of the Lutheran World Federation Council Meeting, held in Geneva, June 13, 2019. The sermon, preached while Larry was a North American representative of the Lutheran World Federation Council, was based on the theme for the Council Meeting from John 10:4, Because We Know God's Voice. It has been slightly adapted for this occasion. It is offered mindful of the Rev. Dr. Gordon A. Jensen's involvement and engagement in many ways and for many years with the Lutheran World Federation.

broke off a second square and then a third square and so on, until finally, there were only a few squares and chocolate crumbs left.

Well, we managed the rest of the afternoon just fine—but as the day continued, the churning in our stomachs became pain-filled, until finally we approached our grandmother; you see, we couldn't stand our sin any longer. She was alone at the kitchen table. She sat facing us as we entered the room. It was a large, farm table—the color of the chocolate bar—in the shape of a coffin.

"We..." We were unable to look at her—our eyes lowered—we glanced at each other.

"Yes, what is it?" She asked.

"We ... well, you know the chocolate bar in your purse?"

"Yes."

"Well ... yes ... we ate most of it."

"Ah," said my grandmother. "Did you ask permission? Did you ask me for a bite?"

"No."

"Ah, what did you do then?"

"We ... we snuck into the bedroom and took a few bites."

"Ah, a few bites?"

"Well ... yes ... most of it."

Slowly our grandmother rose from behind the chocolate-coloured, coffin-shaped, large farm table. We didn't look at her. Slowly she rounded the far side and came toward us— heavy, dark print dress, severe grey-blue hair, stern wire-framed glasses. Judgement was coming. Punishment was on its way. And I was prepared for the discipline. I lowered my head further into my chest. But I was altogether unprepared for what my grandmother did.

In a beautiful, musical lilt layered with grace and compassion and love, she spoke my name, "Lar," and then she spoke my brother's name. And then she knelt down in front of us, and she took us in her arms, and she hugged us—and as we cried and cried, she began to say over and over, "I love you, I love you, I love you. You silly boys."

I first knew God's voice through my grandmother's voice. Her voice had a musical quality—a lilt to it, dance-like: an inflection of grace, a tone of compassion, a rhythm of love. It is this same lilt, this same inflection, tone, and rhythm that the sheep hear when the shepherd comes to the sheepfold. This shepherd comes through the gate and calls each sheep by name—a name that speaks of relationship, of intimacy, of knowing, of love. This shepherd leads them out, goes ahead of the flock, and the sheep follow because they know the voice of the shepherd.

Because they know the shepherd's voice—they follow. They trust this one, whose voice they dance to. They follow as the shepherd leads them to pasture, to water—to sustenance. Because they know the shepherd's voice—they follow. They trust this one, whose voice they dance to. They are reliant and dependent on the shepherd to provide everything needed for their lives—even abundant life itself.

Oh, other voices will and do sound appealing, alluring, charming—a different lilt, a distinctive inflection, a singular tone, a surprising rhythm. But these thieves and bandits and strangers do not know the sheep. They do not know each sheep by name. These thieves and bandits and strangers pose threats to the sheep because they are not the shepherd. Their voices—rather than singing grace, compassion, love—murmur discordantly of fear,

isolation, violence, populism, xenophobia, fundamentalism, discrimination, contempt for international law and human rights, abuse of creation, human trafficking, inequality.

Indeed, our global context reminds us that we live in challenging, evolving times marked by many different voices, with many different agendas, with many different purposes other than care for the sheep—other than provision for all, other than justice, peace, and reconciliation. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice—they are called by name—they follow the shepherd's voice. A voice tender with grace, intoned with compassion, sung in love.

The voice from this gospel according to John that sings to the curious: "Come and see." The voice from this gospel according to John that sings above the storm: "It is I; do not be afraid." The voice that sings to the astonished mourners: "Unbind him and let him go." The voice from the cross singing with arms open wide in an embrace of love and self-less giving and solidarity: "It is finished." The voice that sings at the empty tomb: "Mary." The voice that sings: "Peace be with you," and, "Follow me."

This voice also sings to each of us: "Lar, child of God, you have been marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever." This voice gathers us at the table singing: "The body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ shed for you." This voice sings liberation by God's grace.

Because we know God's voice ... we dare to dance together in communion—dancing in response to this voice, dancing with passion for the church and for the world as together we seek to live out the Lutheran World Federation Strategy 2019–2024.

Because we know God's voice ... we follow this voice living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world, expressed in the Lutheran World Federation Vision Statement.

Because we know God's voice ... we trust that our presence and voice as a global communion offers a witness of prophetic defiance, one that speaks about God's compassionate and liberating presence in our world.

Because we know God's voice ... we believe that our engagement in the world comes from the action of the Triune God who calls, transforms, and equips us to participate in God's mission of justice, peace, and reconciliation, voiced in the Lutheran World Federation Strategy 2019–2024.

Because we know God's voice. Because we know God's voice.

I first knew God's voice through my maternal grandmother's voice. Her voice had a musical quality—a lilt to it, dance-like: an inflection of grace, a tone of compassion, a rhythm of love.

Now, gathered here, we will listen together for God's voice. And we will respond to this voice in a song of grace, compassion, and love; in a melody and harmony, a tempo and rhythm, that will set the world dancing.