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FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

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We live in a world afflicted by a cacophony of voices. We are bombarded by an avalanche of digital distractions – whether on social media or emails, on our iPads or iPhones, on our televisions or newspapers. Added to this digital chaos are other voices that compete for our attention or attempt to shape our image of self and our world.

At times these voices become so loud they drown out our very capacity to think, to reflect, to stop and notice what is truly essential and what makes us truly human. Other times, such noise and distraction create confusion and intensify our inability to act. We ask: What in a world where there seems to be no end to a string of bad news can I do? Floods, droughts, conflict, sectarian violence, people on the move confronted by walls of xenophobia and bigotry.... The list is as *frightening* as the noise it generates is *deafening*.

Today's gospel, as told by John, invites to notice and listen to one more voice. It is the voice of the Shepherd who says: "My sheep hear my voice"; "I am the Shepherd who calls my own sheep by name and lead them out.... My sheep follow me, because they recognize my voice." This voice is refreshingly different: the voice of the Shepherd does not assail us with material distractions; rather, the Shepherd offers us life: I have come that you may have life in abundance. What a *consoling* voice amidst the *chaos* and *confusion* of our 21st century digitalized world! The voice of the Shepherd restores our inner peace and calm. The Shepherd's voice refocuses our attention on that which is truly life-giving.

But there is one condition for hearing the voice of this Good and Life-giving Shepherd. The word is SILENCE.... Silence is not merely the absence of noise. Silence is our capacity for depth and interiority. Silence takes us to the place where true encounter happens between us and the Shepherd who calls our souls out to green and verdant pastures. I recall a poem by Harry Alfred Wiggett; he says, "Silence is Sitting still/Standing still/Lying still/ Consciously/Gratefully/Gracefully...." This is the kind of silence that enabled Elijah to hear God's small, still voice; the silence that empowered Samuel to say to God, "Speak, I hear you, I am listening"; it is the silence that Psalm 46 invites us to: "Be still and know that I am God; be still and know; be still ... be."

I hear in today's gospel an invitation to cultivate an attitude of silence. This attitude of silence *begins* when we *stop* and listen – like Elijah on the mountain, like Samuel in the temple, like Hannah at prayer,

and like Mary at the Annunciation. It doesn't take much: it could involve as little as retreating from the digital chaos that surrounds me – just for a few minutes, even a couple of minutes, at a time. It means trying to find our own Interior Castle where the *confusion* and *chaos* of “thieves and robbers” give way to the *consoling* and *comforting* voice of the Good Shepherd. Cultivating silence and creating a space of silence where God encounters us freely takes effort, but it's one step at a time, one day at a time. Think of it: How much richer would our lives be if we could only intersperse our frenetic busyness with little pockets of silence!

Something else about silence: there is a powerful and empowering quality to the gift of silence. Years ago, I read a story in Chinua Achebe's classic, *Things Fall Apart*, about a Mother Kite who sent her daughter to bring food. When Daughter Kite brought back a duckling, Mother Kite asked: “What did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?” “It said nothing,” replied the young kite. “It just walked away.” “Then, you must return the duckling,” said Mother Kite. “There is something ominous behind the silence.” And so Daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead. “What did the mother of this chick do?” asked the old kite. “It cried and raved and cursed me,” said the young kite. Mother Kite replied: “There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts.”

As a woman, I am deeply in tune with my inner capacity for thought, reflection, and action. As an African woman Catholic, I have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd *calling* me by name, *emboldening* my imagination, and *strengthening* my resolve strive for fullness of life for me, for my sisters and for my brothers. Yet, I am too painfully aware, too, that my voice may not always be as loud, strident, and valued as those who shout with power and authority, who lord it over others in the church.

Nevertheless, life-giving and empowering voices of women are rising across the world, in church and society. We have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd; we have been nourished by God's gift of abundant life. With *passion* and *compassion*, we lift our voices to ask: Why is our church not listening to us? Why does our church not hear our voices?

Like the Good Shepherd, we bring gifts of life to renew our broken world. We come with our talents and gifts to nourish the community of the Risen Christ. We come not to *burgle* or to *steal*, but to *cradle* humanity with compassion and to *reveal* the face of God as love.

Let me leave you with a quote from the second African Synod: “Women in Africa make a great contribution to the family, to society and to the Church by their many talents and unique gifts. . . . The Church and society need women to take their full place in the world ‘so that the human race can live in the world without completely losing its humanity’” (*Africae Munus*, no. 55).

As women, our voices are an embodiment of this quest for humanity promised us by the Good Shepherd.

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