

---

## *A Voice He Knew*

**A homily by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell  
for the burial of George Walbridge Perkins Atkins, Jr.**

Doug read a passage from the Gospel of John in which Jesus tells a story about a good shepherd. In the hill country where Jesus first told this story, a shepherd did not keep his sheep alone. When the light failed, the flocks came down off the hills together, and several shepherds would fold their sheep in one place — a stone enclosure, or a cave with a single opening — and one of them would keep the gate while the others slept. All night the sheep were mingled. In the dark you could not have said whose was whose. They were simply a crowd of sheep, breathing together, waiting for morning.

Then the light came, and the shepherds came with it, and each one stood and called. He did not go in and drag his sheep out. He called them — many of them by name — and out of that mingled crowd his own lifted their heads at the sound of him, and came, and followed him out to pasture. It was the oldest sorting in the world, and it was done by voice alone. Each sheep knew the one who had fed it, and led it, and slept across its gate. And it would not follow a stranger. A sheep may not know much. But it knows that.

We spend our lives in that mingled fold, and it is a noisy place. So many voices call us, and most of them call us by names that are not finally our own — what we are worth, what we have built, whose name is on the door. It is possible to spend a whole life answering to those names. Some of them are even worth answering to, for a while.

George heard more of those voices than most of us. His was a large life, lived among a great many calls — a career spent, of all things, in trust: thirty-three years of holding faithfully what other people had entrusted to him, and a lifetime of service to more good causes than we could name from this pulpit. He answered those calls well. He carried real weight, and he carried it lightly, with a humor that put everyone around him at ease. He had a gift for knowing people — anyone, from any walk of life. He could find the person behind the title and set them at ease in about a minute.

But underneath the large public life there was a quiet man of personal faith. And I have come to believe that what he was doing all those years, under all that noise, is the very thing a sheep does in the dark of the fold. He was learning a Voice. He was learning to tell the true one from all the others. Because faith, in the end, is not mostly vigilance. It is recognition. You spend enough years near the Shepherd, and you simply come to know the sound of him, until you cannot be fooled anymore. I know my own, Jesus says, and my own know me.

On the eighteenth of July, the fold was very dark. It had been a long night — many months of it, machines and monitors, a Marine's body finally worn down by the fight. And into that dark, at the last, the Shepherd came to the gate, and he called George out.

He did not call him Captain. He did not use any of the titles the world had laid on him. He called him by the name his mother gave him, the name you love him by — George. And George knew the Voice. Of course he did; he had been listening for it his whole life. He lifted his head, and he answered, and he was not snatched from you by any thief in the night. He was led — gently — out of the pen of this life, out through the one gate who is Christ himself, into open country. The green pasture. The still water. The place where, as we will pray in a few moments, sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting.

This is why we can bury a man we love and still find ourselves singing. Because this is an Easter liturgy, and

the call that led him out of the fold came at dawn. Ceci read it for us: the Lord who watches over your going out and your coming in, who neither slumbers nor sleeps — the Gatekeeper who kept the fold through the whole long night, and opened it at first light.

Martha — for sixty-six years you knew his voice, and he knew yours. That knowing has not ended. It has only gone on ahead of you, out to pasture, where the Shepherd holds him now and knows him by name.

As Freeman reminded us, George fought the good fight. He finished the race. He kept the faith — which is only to say that he kept listening; and at the very end he heard his name, and he went.

Well done, good and faithful servant.

Amen.