

Bow wow. That's dogspeak for "Wassup!," according to a device that was created by a Japanese toy company....to help translate dog barks into English. The hope was that you would be able to understand what Rover was telling you when he or she woofed something otherwise unintelligible. The gadget, that was eventually built by a Toy maker called Takara, was called Bow-Lingual and as you can probably tell from the name it was supposed to work only on dogs. Not cats, or hamsters, or horses, or gold fish, just dogs. But as you can probably imagine the device was far from perfect, and it actually ended up being sold as a novelty toy, rather than something that could be used to help us actually understand our canine companions.

I think that those of us truly love animals will agree that it would be rather amazing and incredible if we could figure out a way to communicate with our pets! Humans have always been fascinated, or at least entertained, by the possibility of talking to animals. On screen we've been subjected to characters ranging from Rober Downey Jr's Dr. Doolittle, to the classic Mr. Ed, to Alvin and the Chimunks, to Life with Pets 1 and 2.

The Bow-Lingual electronic device supposedly worked by placing an electronic transmitter on your dog's collar that would activate every time it barked; sending a signal to a receiver, which would then interpret each bark into previously designed text patterns within six different "mood" categories: Happy, Sad, Frustrated, Needy, On Guard and Assertive. When a delivery person rang your doorbell, you were supposed to be able to tell whether your dog was sensing "bad karma," saying "Careful whom you mess with," or if they were happily proclaiming "You know what I like."

Unsurprisingly users reported mixed results with the device. Often the translation didn't match up with the circumstance surrounding the bark and, if you really get down to it, who needs a translator to tell whether a dog is happy, sad, or angry? It also turns out that some of the text

responses seemed to stretch the credibility of the device to its limit. After all, do dogs really think things like “I’ll be contacting my attorney”? Cats, maybe — — but not dogs. Still, there’s something intriguing about the possibility of discovering a human-animal communication — particularly when we consider the fact that human behavior often seems to mimic behavior observed in the animal kingdom.

Notice that when Jesus speaks of his followers, one of the metaphors he uses for them is “sheep.” In his day, sheep were the staple livestock of the culture and were as common around towns and villages as dogs are around the family home today. Shepherds, however, clearly understood the communication style of the sheep in their care without the aid of any Baah-Lingual device. It was merely a matter of knowing the language and the nature of the herd. Consider these facts about sheep (and people) that every shepherd knows:

Sheep are gregarious. In other words, sheep will always band together and pretty much stay together when grazing or moving around. It’s not because they like each other, although they are social animals, but because they find security in numbers. “Get one to go and they’ll all go” is a principle that all shepherds know and follow.

In the sheep herd, separation from the flock causes extreme stress and sheep will communicate this through high-pitched bleating. In humans it’s communicated through the high-pitched cries of loneliness, addiction, and depression. Jesus’ miracles and works of healing were evidence that he was bringing all the lost and hurting sheep — both Jews and Gentiles — under his care.

When Jesus was asked by those around him whether he was the Messiah, it was a question of belonging and of security. The Messiah was to be the one who would bring the whole “flock” of Israel together, and provide protection and victory against the Roman oppressors.

Jesus reinterprets their tradition, however, and reminds them that theirs is not an exclusive flock, but rather that there are “other sheep that do not belong to this fold” who he longs to bring in as well — even the Gentiles, like the Roman soldiers who were currently walking their streets.

It was a call to expand the flock — to bring more and more people under the protection, grace and love of the Good Shepherd. Jesus’ statement is a cautionary word to *those who think they know who belongs to, or does not belong to, God’s flock*. In other words, we can’t be thinking that our “brand” is the only brand. The Shepherd knows the sheep, and it sounds like Jesus is saying that we might be surprised to discover just how many variations and breeds there are in the flock we call the church. I have often heard it said, when we get to heaven we will probably be surprised at who we find there.

In a culture like ours, where rugged individualism is a high value, the idea of “flocking” or being “herded” isn’t too appealing. We’d prefer to see ourselves as individuals of worth, but not necessarily valued because of our connection to a community. It is closer to the truth to understand that, like sheep, we are social animals who need each other, need to belong, and we herd instinctively. We tend to hang out with people that are like us, or who have the same interests and hobbies that we do.

We can’t always make it on our own — or at least not as well as we can make it when we’re aligned with a flock of others to provide comfort and security.... and a Shepherd to watch over our well-being. We need others and we need Christ! That’s the whole reason for the church — a real expression of what it means to be connected and protected in Christ.

So, are you still having trouble with the whole sheep/human connection? Well, consider this important second fact that shepherds know: Sheep are intelligent. This flies in the face of everything we’ve been taught about sheep. And, in some respects, at first glance they don’t

appear to be all that smart. They eat too much, right down to the root. They'll drink contaminated water. When they fall, they often can't get up without some shepherd assistance. And the herding thing — they tend to follow aimlessly and blindly and with no apparent destination in mind.

But this is only part of the story. Contrary to conventional wisdom that sheep are stupid animals, sheep rank just below the pig, and are on par with cattle in the IQ department of farm animals. A study at the Babraham Institute in Cambridge, England, showed that sheep have remarkable memories, being able to pick out a particular face in a line of pictures, if that face is associated with a food reward. Some of the sheep in the study could remember up to 50 images for as long as two years. That is a sign of higher intelligence, according to Dr. Keith Kendrick, one of the authors of the study.

Sheep also have keen hearing, which makes it possible for them *to discern the voice of their shepherd* from among many others, and they will always move toward the person they perceive to be a friend, particularly if that friend feeds the sheep. Sheep aren't as dumb as we think, unless that is, they become frightened or scared.

Dr. Kendrick believes that a sheep's reputation for stupidity comes from the fact that sheep are afraid of just about everything. He says, "Any animal, including humans, once they are scared, don't tend to show signs of intelligent behavior." Fear causes a flock to disintegrate, and when sheep are driven apart they are most vulnerable to predators.

Jesus' call for others to follow him was a literal way of leading people out of danger. Jesus understood that it was his voice — God's voice, God's authority — to which his "sheep" would come running, no matter how far they had strayed. "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."

Thus it is the Shepherd who is Baah-lingual — he understands the language of the flock. He knows what they need, how to keep them safe, how to care for them. Perhaps in light of this reality one might say that we sheep need to learn to be “Shepherd-lingual.” We need to be able to recognize, understand, and know the voice of the Shepherd. The people who responded to Christ’s message and witnessed his miracles of healing, love, and grace knew that it was only through Jesus that they would be spiritually fed and their lives be made at peace, both in the present age and in the one to come. It was his voice that promised, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand”.

The Father who gives us to Jesus is greater than any other power! There is nothing that can snatch us away from Jesus or from the Father. Our proclamation then can include all those forces and powers that would seek to snatch us away from Jesus –most notable our own sinfulness, the many forms of suffering we experience, and ultimately our deaths –but God is more powerful than these. God may not make such suffering go away, but we know for certain that nothing can separate us from Jesus.

Yet, sometimes the problem is not that we, the sheep of his pasture, do not recognize the voice of the Shepherd. Rather, we recognize it and refuse to listen. Or we listen selectively. We have no problem listening when the voice of the Shepherd is offering words of comfort and reassurance. Author and Pastor F. Dean Leuking reminds us of this when he says, “When it comes to speaking one sentence to someone hanging onto life by a thread in a hospital emergency room at 3 a.m., ‘I am the good shepherd ... who lays down his life for the sheep’ is unsurpassed. The Good Shepherd himself makes these words work. For he in fact did indeed lay down his life for the world, of his own accord, and has received power from his Father to take it again.”

That, we can listen to.....but when the Shepherd calls us to follow him, sometimes through the valley of the shadow of death, or through the valleys of self-denial, obedience, self-sacrifice, or unconditional love — then we sheep don't always hear so well. We often become scared, and when we're scared, like sheep, we do stupid things. We take a wrong turn, we make ill-advised decisions, we become self-destructive.

And sometimes, we'll even forsake the Shepherd and turn instead to a bogus Beastmaster, who — surprise, surprise — turns out to be a wolf in shepherd's clothing. In a world that's increasingly more scattered and scared, our task as Christ's Church is to be truly “Baah- lingual” — to constantly and compassionately translate and transmit the voice of the Good Shepherd to all those lost sheep in the world who are hurting, alone, or perhaps have even gone astray. It's also about following Jesus' example and welcoming everyone into the fold. What we the sheep do..... should be and is dependent on our Good Shepherd.

I think that the concept of the Father giving us to Jesus is one of the hardest concepts for us to grasp. We are part of Jesus' flock because of what God has done, not because of anything we have done, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

Some may wonder, can we refuse to be God's gift to Jesus? Jesus is clear that “the Jews” to whom he is speaking do not belong to his sheep. Why not? They refuse to listen and they refuse to follow. And what did they refuse to hear? “All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” On this fourth Sunday of Easter as long as we remember that we have been chosen by God, that we are part of Jesus' flock, that we belong to Jesus, that we are sheep of God... Nothing will be able to separate us from the Herd, our Christian family, the body of Christ! Amen.