

John 10:1-10  
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*Voice Recognition*

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"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 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. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

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I was struck this last week by a photo I saw in the news of armed protestors who had stormed the Michigan capitol and were yelling, unmasked, directly into the faces of the guards, as the guards stood there, breathing in God-knows what pathogens that the protestors might have been spewing along with their anger.

Those protestors didn't just show up, guns-in-hand, spontaneously. What voice are they listening to, I wonder that encourages that kind of behavior, and fans the flames of their rage?

And as this crisis continues and we try to discern the way forward, whose voice do we listen to? Whose guidance do we heed?

“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep,” says Jesus. “...the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger, but will run from him because they don’t recognize the voice of strangers.”

So, whose voice are you listening to these days? Amid the cacophony of our many news outlets, Facebook and Reddit and Twitter feeds, to whom, when they speak, do you sit up and listen? Whose voice do you follow when you’re trying to find your way?

That’s the question that Jesus seeks to answer in our Gospel passage. “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep,” says Jesus. “...the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

The key to our health—even our survival—is our ability to recognize the one who will guide us to safety. Fortunately for us, what we learn in the passage from John is that sheep are apparently smarter than we might think: “the sheep hear his voice,” it says. “they won’t follow the voice of a stranger.”

Jesus speaks these words in the midst of conflict between himself and many of the official leaders of his day. Those leaders were finding ways to profit from the turmoil of their own time, even as they claimed to speak for God, saying that those who suffered were experiencing divine punishment.

But the Good Shepherd, as Jesus told them, was not about exploitation or punishment or death. The Good Shepherd was about calling the sheep to safety. The Good Shepherd was about leading them to green pastures and still waters and brimming tables and life—abundant life.

When I read Psalm 23, that classic portrait of God as our shepherd, what comes over me is a feeling of deep calm. The shepherd doesn't help the psalmist to avoid the dark valley, or rage against the difficulties of that valley—instead, the shepherd leads them through without panic, without recrimination, without hurry. The shepherd guides them with intentionality, aware of the surroundings, alert to the dangers of that wilderness, even while providing the still waters, the nourishment, the soothing oil that will sustain them in their struggle.

So, if we are trying to decipher how God is speaking to us in the midst of all the other voices, we need to listen for that calm wisdom and sustaining nurture.

“The sheep hear his voice,” Jesus says. “He calls them by name and leads them out....they follow him because they know his voice.” And later, he warns: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

This, now, is a critical moment in the life of the church and the nation and the world. We are surrounded by a lot of dangers, and whose voice we listen to can mean the difference between life and death—not just for us, but for everyone around us. But it's not easy to know whose voice to follow—especially when there have always been those who claim to speak for God. With it no longer possible to hear Jesus' voice directly, how do we know who speaks for him?

Well, Jesus tells us that this is the litmus test: whether the voice we hear is leading toward death and destruction, or toward life and abundance.

Jesus' voice has always called us toward life. More than that, Jesus' voice has always called us to care for the lives of others. A shepherd, after all, doesn't watch over just one sheep. A shepherd cares for the entire flock. And just as we hope for the day of herd immunity from COVID-19, it is as a flock, or community, that Jesus calls us toward life.

So, the one who became poor for our sake, isn't going to tell us to put profits over people, or to grab whatever we can get at the expense of our neighbors.

The one who risked his own life in order to defend the poor and women and outcasts isn't going to tell us to defend our rights by trampling on the rights of others.

The one who told us to love our neighbors as ourselves isn't going to tell us that some of those neighbors are now expendable.

We aren't out of this particular wilderness, and we won't be for a long time. The only way to get through it is to be sure we are following the right voice: God's voice.

Today, God's voice calls us to the table—set for us in the midst of this wilderness. There, we will remember what it feels like to be gathered together. To be cared for. To be nurtured. We will hear Christ's loving invitation, and taste, once more, his goodness.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, says the psalmist. Goodness and mercy.

Because that's what's at the heart of it all, and at the center of everything that comes from the mouth of God: goodness. God's goodness and mercy for us, and for this whole world.

Our true Shepherd won't call us to anything less. Thanks be to God.