

Hearing the Good Shepherd's Voice
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“The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” (John 10:3)

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.” (John 10:9)

Whether speaking with fellow faculty, students, and staff—or even more intimately with my own family friends—a prevailing mantra persists in our conversations that speaks in some way to all of our lives in the current moment: “I don’t know.” I don’t know when this will be over. I don’t know when, or how, life will be ‘normal’ again. I don’t know when I’ll get to congratulate and hug my graduating seniors this semester. I don’t know how my classes will look next semester. I don’t know when I’ll be able to attend Mass and take the Eucharist again. I don’t know when my children will get to see their grandparents. I don’t know when the kids will go back to school. I don’t know when we’ll be able to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries together. I don’t know when we’ll be able to mourn together. I don’t know how this pandemic will change me and everyone around me. I don’t know how to react, or, perhaps more importantly, even how I ought to react.

Though our life situations may be different, the “I don’t know” mantra is a connective tissue that binds us all together right now, and I suspect you can recount many similar conversations and concerns you’ve had recently. Perhaps, as you were reading, the anxiety of this moment, and its attendant not knowing can began to overwhelm you, as it too often does me. While this Gospel passage doesn’t provide clear-cut answers to every single “I don’t know,” it does offer a clear path forward and a clear solution to the fear that not knowing can elicit.

This Gospel reading occurs on what is called “Good Shepherd” Sunday. In this passage, Jesus provides the well-known metaphor of himself as a shepherd, telling the Pharisees that “anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.” This pandemic has snuck in, “climbed” in our lives and altered them all irrevocably. It has likewise “robbed” us of certainty, of togetherness, perhaps even of joy.

The Christian promise, however, reminds us that that these parts of our lives can never be stolen from us. The certainty of Jesus’s sacrifice for us, the togetherness that comes from communion with him and each other as believers, and the joy that comes from his constant love have always remained invariable. Nothing has been stolen. We simply need to remember that Jesus is the one in control and “listen to his voice.” Scripture states, “The gatekeeper opens the gate . . . and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

That seems simple enough, but what about those other, overwhelming voices—the chorus of “I don’t know” that can make us feel as if we are without anyone to guide us, that we are alone? Quite simply, Jesus tells us to ignore them. His sheep “will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” In my daily life, I admit that I am often distracted by “strangers.” I am distracted by the media, which is conflicted and fearful. I am distracted by my own thoughts, which can be the same. I am distracted by

Satan, “that thief [who] comes only to steal and destroy.” I am distracted by the “I don’t know” of this pandemic because I sometimes I forget that I do.

There’s a song by contemporary Christian singer and songwriter Natalie Grant that I’ve listened to often recently in which the singer asks Jesus, “When did I forget that you were King of the world?” While the pandemic may sometimes cause us as humans to forget the shepherding that Jesus can give us through any trial, his strength and power doesn’t alter. As members of his flock, it is up to us to reflect and recognize when we are being led astray. The pandemic may have us all social distancing from each other, but it should not, and does not, have the power to distance us from God. It is our role as sheep to listen to the only voice that matters. It is our role to listen, especially when it is most difficult, to His voice.

At the end of this passage, Jesus states “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” Jesus assures us that life with him as our shepherd is never half-lived. If we trust in his ability to guide us, then we will always remember it is not up to us know the logistics of anything. Rather, it is up to us to “live” through it, knowing that he took care of our futures long before the current crisis. After all, while the “Pharisees did not understand what Jesus was telling [them],” we as his sheep do. Our charge is simply to hear him and remember that he will “lead” us “out of” this pasture and into another one resplendent with all the hope, joy, and love the Easter season promises.