

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2020

Pastor Zach Johnson
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Pasadena, California

Gospel: John 10:1-10

[Jesus said:] ¹“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.

²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

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We live in a world where there are constant voices competing for our attention. Some of the voices are pleasant and good, such as the voices of our loved ones. Some voices are there to teach us things, such as the voices of wise elders and educators/instructors. There are also voices that try to convey information to us, such as the voice of a dictionary, Google, or the news.

But, then are the voices that try and lead us astray. There are the voices of temptation that try and convince us to be selfish and uncaring. Voices of greed abound through being bombarded with commercials and advertisements. Of course, there are also the voices of bad advice; oversimplification; denial; misinformation; and bad theology.



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Every day we have to contend with these voices and figure out which ones are worth listening to and which ones we should tune out. I'm guessing that, for the most part, we do just fine with this; yet, there are so many voices, voices upon voices, trying to state their case to us that we can easily get lost and overwhelmed. And some of the voices can be so convincing with their charismatic charms that we easily fall for them, even if they are bad voices. Or, some voices can ignite such a passion in us (positive or negative) that we forget to think things through and blindly follow. There is a reason TV news stations like Fox News and CNN are so controversial. The producers of these news shows know that the more edgy a stand their news anchors take on an issue the more it will get us to watch and respond, which helps them gain more marketing dollars. It's really kind of sad how we as a society continually fall for this trick.

With all of these voices that we have to contend with, how do we even begin to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd? How do we know which voices are conveying God's will and desire to us?

I have seen the signs of protestors stating things like: "Faith over fear," and "faith vs. fear." I've witnessed the news of some state governors making the decision to allow churches to hold mass gatherings, stating that practice of religion is essential. Is this the will of God? Is this God's desire?

Well, I believe the answer that we can look to for guidance, the voice we can turn to when we are in need of advisement is, of course, God's Word. And when I say God's Word, I'm referring to the *Word made Flesh*, Jesus. In vs. 10 of our gospel reading today Jesus says to us: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." It is clear that the voice of Jesus, which is the voice of God, is one that promotes life, gives life, and protects life.

Back on April 2nd, the Sacramento Bee posted an article on their website about a clear linkage between churches that have refused to stop faith gatherings and the number of people associated with those faith communities contracting COVID-19. The numbers are heartbreaking. If God's voice, the voice of the Word made Flesh, states that he comes so that we may have abundant life, then it becomes clear that God does not want churches to hold mass gatherings, for there is a risk to people's lives. We know that COVID-19 can lead to death. After all, over 40,000 Americans have already died due to COVID-19 (and no, that isn't an exaggeration!). To open up our faith communities to mass gatherings would be to promote the destruction of death.

And this can be hard for us, for practicing our faith is essential. But, as we can all clearly witness through our virtual worship and devotional videos, there are ways to practice faith while continuing to practice safe social distancing. Studying God's word with others and praying with others can easily be done over the phone or through a video call platform such as Zoom. I know it's hard because we would love to see each other in person again, but is it worth it to risk their life or your life? Yes, God desires our worship and praise, but not at the cost of the lives of other people.



But this does bring up another issue. The protests, while for some they are motivated by privilege and greed, there are others who are legitimately suffering. Many lives are in financial turmoil because of business shutdowns. I fully understand why some people are protesting. They are desperate and don't know what else to do. I am concerned for how many more people will end up homeless and extremely poor because of the pandemic. They are suffering.

Many of us are suffering in different ways during this pandemic as well. Is this suffering a test of our faith? Some Christians would say that God causes us to suffer in order to strengthen our faith, but I have a hard time believing in a God that would do that, especially when we claim that God promotes life. Some Christians would also say that we are to suffer because Christ suffered on the cross; to be a Christian is to suffer. Now, there is some truth to that, but it is because following Jesus is a problem for mainstream society and their rejection of our beliefs and values can sometimes cause us to suffer. But, we are not made to suffer just because Jesus died on the cross.

The truth of our broken world is that suffering happens to us no matter what. We can never fully avoid suffering. But the good news of Jesus on the cross is that, because Jesus suffered, he knows our suffering. Jesus is able to walk with us in the midst of our suffering because he has endured it. But Jesus also has experienced resurrection, and Jesus knows that the suffering we experience will not last. The tomb is empty, death has been defeated, new life is our new reality. Jesus will walk with us and guide us through our suffering until that day we experience resurrection. Jesus has shown us that new life is a free gift for us and that we don't have to spend our whole life in the pit of suffering; Jesus won't let us stay there. We are also assured of this through baptism.

Because of this we are free to be a church that indeed promotes life. And what I mean here is not that we spend all of our time spreading positive messages on Facebook, but that we find other ways to promote life as well. One thing to consider is how we might reach out to our elected officials and ask them to provide more aid for those who are financially unstable. If you are able, we are always in need of volunteers and donations for our Saturday food pantry. We have been averaging 60-80 people a Saturday who come to us for food. Have a family member or friend who is feeling lost and alone? Reach out to them with a phone call, letter, email, or video chat. Lutheran Social Services of California is still doing important work to care for some of the most vulnerable in our communities. Consider donating a gift to them to support their ministry. Supporting ELCA World Hunger would also be a great way to promote life!

We have the opportunity to echo the voice of the Good Shepherd in our community, in our country, and in the world, for Jesus has freed us through the cross and the empty tomb to follow the voice that brings abundant life. And following the voice of the Good Shepherd; echoing the Good Shepherd's voice is what it means to be the church.

Amen.

