

Pastor Joe Polzin
 John 10:1-10
 “The Voice of the Shepherd”
 Year A – Fourth Sunday of Easter
 May 3, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Living through a global pandemic in an era of 24/7 news and social media has taught us that when you are looking for true guidance on what you should do or not do, there’s no shortage of voices clamoring for your attention. I saw a video circulating online the other day of a comedian who was pretending to hold a news conference, summarizing all the “official” guidelines we’ve been given. Here’s just a portion of how it went:

“First, you must not leave the house, for any reason, unless of course you have a reason, and then you may leave the house. All stores are closed except those that are open, and all stores must close unless, of course, they need to stay open. This virus is deadly, but don’t be afraid of it, it can only affect people who are vulnerable, and also those who are not vulnerable. We should stay locked down until the virus stops infecting people, and it will only stop infecting people if enough of us get infected that we build immunity. So, it is very important that we get infected and also do not get infected.”

Now, I’m not intending to make light of an otherwise serious situation, but rather the point of this routine points out the sometimes conflicting information that comes our way, and how it seems to change depending on who you’re listening to. It can be enough to make our heads spin, and we’re left wondering, which voice can I actually trust?

Well, that’s precisely the issue we see in our Gospel Reading today from John chapter 10: which voice can I actually trust? Now Jesus wasn’t talking about guidelines for a viral pandemic. Instead, Jesus was actually addressing something much more consequential. He was talking about which voice to trust when it comes to our eternal salvation.

Jesus said, “He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (10:2-4). Jesus is saying, just as sheep listen for the voice of their own shepherd, whom they trust, God’s people listen for the voice of their shepherd.

When the people were confused what Jesus was talking about, and whose voice he was actually referring to, Jesus clarifies. He says, “I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and 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” (10:7-10).

Now, we’re used to Jesus talking about himself as the Good Shepherd, as this Sunday every Easter season is called Good Shepherd Sunday. And of course, that’s who Jesus is. He’s going to say so in the very next verse, verse 11, which we’ll hear next year. But what’s unique about this year’s reading is that, first, Jesus identifies how you, the sheep, know you’re following the right shepherd and not the voice of a stranger (10:5). Thieves and robbers are those who come in by ways other than the door. The true shepherd is one who leads the sheep in and out of

the door. And so, the question is, what is the door? Well, Jesus says, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved.”

The people of Israel had many voices clamoring for their attention. The most prominent one was the voice of the Pharisees, whom Jesus was addressing. This discussion of shepherds is all on the heels of John chapter 9, where Jesus had just given sight to a blind man, so that he could not only physically see, but also so that he could have the faith to see Jesus as his Lord and Shepherd. Jesus had also condemned the Pharisees, the ones who were truly blind, for misleading the people of God.

The Pharisees demanded a rigorous adherence to the Law, to the point where they were not only putting their trust for salvation in their ability to keep that Law, but also they would actively condemn others who weren't as “holy” as they were. The “door” they were trying to lead the sheep through, so to speak, wasn't Jesus. It was their own supposed righteousness.

And so they were the ones who were climbing the fences to mislead the flock away from God's promise of a Savior, leading the sheep to spiritual death, all the while claiming they were the proper shepherds of Israel, not Jesus. And Jesus was saying they were actually the voice of strangers, robbers, and killers who would lead the flock away from the life-giving promises of God, and toward the empty promises of human sin and eventually death.

We hear these kinds of voices in our world, as well. Voices clamoring for our attention, making promises of how we are to be saved, attempting to soothe our troubled consciences, and assure us that they hold the promise to a fulfilling life, or true happiness, or eternal contentment. These voices are too numerous to count. Everything from other religions, to spiritual philosophies, to an inordinate trust in science to solve all our problems, to the ever-prevalent American consumeristic-mindset that convinces us that what we truly need, what will truly satisfy us, is whatever the next “bigger and better” thing is.

But the most dangerous and misleading voice that clamors for our attention, just as the Pharisees did in Jesus' day, is the voice that says there are many ways to earn eternal salvation, “doors,” so to speak, other than Jesus. And if you have a hard time believing that people think this way, numerous studies continually show that, even among Christians, the *majority*, more than 50%, believe that people can be saved by something or someone other than Jesus.¹

For instance, people in these studies state that it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something. Or, perhaps most deceptive of all, they believe that God would give eternal life to someone, even non-Christians, simply because they were a “good person.” How many people do we know soothe their consciences by saying, “I don't need to believe all that stuff. God knows I'm a good person. And I'm definitely not as bad as that person over there!”

But these, too, are all voices of false shepherds, of strangers, robbers, and killers. They lead us away from the life-giving promises of God, because they lead us away from admitting we are lost and condemned sinners in desperate need of a Savior. A Savior who promises to forgive, and save, and be their shepherd, which he does lovingly and graciously.

But there isn't another door to go through. This is the *only* way. When Jesus said, “I am the door of the sheep,” it's like he said in John chapter 14, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). Jesus is the only door to the Father. He is the only door by which the sheep may go in and out and find pasture. He is the only door to eternal life.

It's an exclusive claim. It's a claim that our post-modern, progressive, and so-called tolerant world just cannot tolerate. And it's a claim that ended up costing Jesus his own life. The

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2008/12/18/many-americans-say-other-faiths-can-lead-to-eternal-life/>

Pharisees who were listening couldn't stand what Jesus was saying, not only about them, but about himself. So they put the Good Shepherd to death, to silence his voice, so that theirs might once again hold sway over the sheep.

But what we celebrate on Easter, and why we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday in the Easter season, is that our Good Shepherd did not stay dead. Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* Not only does he show us the path to eternal life, but he leads us through the "valley of the shadow of death," and out the other side to life. When you're deciding which voice you're going to listen to, isn't the one who has actually experienced death, defeated it, and came out the other side alive the voice *you* want to follow?

And that's exactly what we Christians do. We are the sheep of Jesus' flock, and so we know which voice to follow. And that's really comforting in a world with so many voices clamoring for our attention. It's Jesus' voice that calls us to himself. To believe in him. To trust in him as our Good Shepherd, the shepherd who laid down his life to protect us from all our enemies. The enemies of fear and uncertainty, the enemies of the devil and all evil, even the enemies of our sin and our notions that we can somehow save ourselves. And the Good Shepherd who rose again will raise us up on the day he returns, and will welcome us into the verdant pastures of his everlasting creation.

And though this door to eternal life is exclusive, Jesus is the *only* door, Jesus' voice is for all people. He uses his under-shepherds, his pastors, but he also uses his entire flock, including you, to share his Word, to let others also hear the voice of the Good Shepherd through you, so that they too may be invited to trust in his all-atoning death and resurrection, that they too might have life and have it abundantly.

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* In his name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our risen Lord. **Amen.**