

**May 3, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: [John 10:1-7](#)**

**TITLE: Voice Recognition**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

What voices are you hearing nowadays? If you are quarantined at home with others, there are the voices of those with you in your house or apartment. There are the voices of the people you call or text. There are the voices from the radio and TV, the computer and Smartphone; there are voices telling you to be safe, describing how to make masks, and government voices saying we must continue to stay at home and keep most Pittsburgh businesses closed for a while longer.

Enough COVID-19 weeks have gone by that we are developing new patterns of behavior shaped by the voices of warning and isolation. Yet every so often, we remember that this new normal is not normal. A newspaper reporter recently described how the current reality goes against our nature. He said, “We are meant to be together. Blending voices in worship and clinking glasses in taverns. Line dancing at weddings and standing in line at [funerals]. High-fiving at ballgames, applauding shamelessly at school concerts [and graduations], moving as one [as we exit crowded movie theaters and concert halls].”<sup>1</sup>

As a pastor, I echo that reporter’s sentiment that these days are not normal. It is not normal only to worship virtually, rather than in person. It is not normal for churches to celebrate communion without gathering at a common table. It is not normal for people in hospitals to be deprived of family visits or bedside prayers from clergy. It is not normal for burials to take place without loved ones gathering or ministers present. What we are doing now is not without value; but that is not to say that this is a new normal we must accept.

These times are not normal. Given that, maybe the question shouldn’t be “What voices are you hearing now?” but rather “What voices do we need to hear now?” That question involves a judgment, because it assumes there are voices that are helpful to hear and voices that are harmful to hear. How can we tell them apart? The cynic would argue that there is no deep, true voice to hear; there is nothing but an empty abyss around us. But I disagree with that. There is meaning in life. There is a purpose to our being and a hope that is stronger than death. We are known, and the One who knows us calls to us. And that voice can be trusted.

To say more about this means I must begin using Christian language: how God’s voice spoke at the beginning of time to choreograph the scientific wonder of this life-sustaining universe, and that voice, the holy Word, became flesh in Jesus Christ that we might hear and become fluent in the language of eternal life. But I need to move slowly here. The language of Christian faith is not always clear to people who have grown up outside the church, and it can be disturbing to people who have been wounded by the church. Lots of voices say things using the vocabulary of Christian faith, but not all that

is said reflects Christian faith. How can we distinguish the voices to follow from the voices to avoid? Here are two quick guides to answering that question.

First, there's a difference between offering simple truths and being simplistic. To be simplistic is to believe that red and blue states are real things and have no overlapping concerns. It is to believe that gender identity is a strict binary reality that favors men; and that race is a biological reality versus being an arbitrary and damaging social construct. Every negative-ism you can name (racism, sexism, nativism) relies on simplistic logic: us vs. them, me vs. you, differences in skin color, age, body size, or trappings of wealth and fashion.

In a simplistic way, we used to believe that essential jobs were high-paying jobs and thus every low-paying, minimum wage job must be non-essential. That was wrong. The truth is that a lot of jobs for which we don't pay well are essential ones. Take care of an elderly parent at home or prepare lessons for a young child having to be home-schooled and you'll soon re-calculate the value of the work done by home health aides and school teachers. The simple truth is that we need to learn to value what are called "double-dignity jobs." A teacher passes on knowledge and mentors young people. A nurse provides medical care and counsels in times of crisis. The crossing guard protects children getting on the bus and connects them with the adult world through acts of friendship and respect. It's time to match the dignity of these dual-purpose jobs with economic justice and living wages.<sup>2</sup>

Second, there's a difference between words that distort and words that clarify. You can flip around a binocular to look through the wrong lens and laugh at how funny and distorted things appear. That distortion may be worth a chuckle, but it's not very helpful. In the same way, when politicians tell us that the coronavirus death toll could have been over two million, but thankfully it is only 65,000 people to date—that is a self-serving distortion. You don't start from 2 million and look down; you always start from one COVID-19 victim—one grandparent, one ER doctor or nurse, one mother suddenly taken from her family—and then look up. For by grieving each one of them, we appreciate the seriousness of this disease as the total moves from that single life to the tens of thousands who have died and sadly will be joined by others. Distortions are designed to avoid blame and distract us from what is true. Clarity comes when we understand the real human costs on a gut level, when we feel it in our hearts and souls, and know that whatever victim we are talking about is a child of God just like you and me.

Faith language offers simple truths that are not simplistic. God is our Creator and Sustainer, mysterious because God exceeds all we can think or imagine—yet a God who chooses to constantly accommodate Godself in moments of beauty, revelation and inner peace so that we know we are never alone. And faith language offers clarity in place of distortions. Clarity comes through seeing with the eyes of the heart, and trusting the good news found in scripture, in its metaphors and deep wisdom.

For example, in the scripture we heard today Jesus referred to himself as a shepherd. That metaphor calls to mind the language of a ruler who is a wise shepherd and leader; for example, King David of old. But it goes deeper than any one historical figure. It calls to mind the prophet Isaiah, who spoke of God's love being like that of a shepherd who feeds her flock, who gathers lambs in his arms; shepherds who carry the meek ones in their bosoms and gently lead them to safety. It calls to mind the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the Good Shepherd who guides us to places of rest, green pastures and still waters. In these words we find simple truths, clarifying wisdom, and comforting peace.

Jesus also referred to himself as a gate. Gates are designed to protect, but they are not offensive weapons intending to harm—like assault weapons or punitive immigration policies. They offer shelter from bandits who would break in solely for personal gain. But notice that Jesus only talks about gates in terms of how he opens them, how he leads people out through them so they can follow his voice on right paths. It is a distortion for any church to consider itself a gatekeeper, defining who is in and who is out. To follow Christ is to allow Christ alone to be the gate and trust that his ministry is about setting free those penned in, those afraid, imprisoned, or unjustly abused in any way. False voices in the church and government waste energy arguing about the need to close all gates, but Jesus counters that he is the gate to life and our energy is better spent listening to his voice and walking beside those whom Christ calls, as we follow him and step out into a saving place of abundant life.

These are not normal times. But if we're honest, they weren't normal times back in February or last year or before that. For too long, voices of charlatans, bandits and bunglers have filled our ears. Maybe it's time to seek out the voice of God—that reminds us that we are not human beings who have occasional spiritual experiences, but rather spiritual beings who have human experiences (Teilhard de Chardin). Maybe it's time to open ourselves to the voice of the Holy Spirit—that blows into our claustrophobic spaces with words of freedom, peace, and grace. Maybe it's time to listen to the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Gate who leads us to abundant and eternal life. That is a voice truly worth recognizing for it calls us each by name—calls us all by name.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Barry, *New York Times*, April 26, 2020, Foreword to photo essay.

<sup>2</sup> Gene B. Sperling, "Economic Dignity for All," *New York Times*, April 26, 2020, p. SR 8.