

Lake Shore Baptist Church Sermon – April 26, 2020

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Text: John 10:1-10

Title: *Hearing, but Not Hearing*

Most of you know that in 2010, at the age of 50 I went to seminary to become a minister. After nearly 30 years I returned to the classroom as a student. I returned to a place familiar to most all of us. I returned to the Baylor campus, the place where Cindy and I met as undergraduates back in the late 70's. It was a surreal experience to leave my safely ensconced role as a professor and dean. I moved from *behind* the lectern, if you will, to go back *in front* of the lectern. Making that transition back to Waco and the Baylor campus was both familiar and unsettling at the same time.

One day I decided to go to the library to study. I was living during the week in a small apartment and I just needed a change of scenery. I'd been to the library several times for resources I needed, but I had yet to go there simply to study. I walked into the foyer of the library and began my hunt for the perfect place to do my work.

I noticed something that day that I hadn't noticed before. There was this incredible din coming from the basement. I looked around down there and there were students with books and laptops open. But there were scores of mouths open, too. It was the loudest place I'd ever heard this side of a football stadium. Voices, voices, voices. A cacophony of human sound, none of it intelligible except maybe to those closest to them.

I quickly learned that my study style was different than that generation of students. Well, duh!

But I was in luck. I went to my old haunt on the third floor, near the music collection. You may know that up on the third floor facing Fountain Mall, there are desks placed in the tall, narrow windows. It was just like it had been thirty years before. It was quiet and had an almost perfect view: there was Pat Neff Hall, big live oak trees, and lots of sky. That spot became my favorite study spot for my three years of seminary. It was a safe place, a familiar place where I could clear my mind and seek God's voice. *It was a place where I could filter out the distracting voices in my ears - and in my life, and in my spirit.*

In today's text Jesus is talking about shepherds and sheep. I know we live in cattle country, but let's talk about sheep.

In the ancient world, shepherds were responsible for protecting the sheep from predators, both animal and human. Shepherds had to make sure they kept the sheep moving toward grass and water. And shepherds knew the names of their sheep. They would call them by name to keep them all together. Even today in the Middle East, shepherds walk in front of their sheep, leading them along and calling their individual

names to keep them moving forward. The sheep know and recognize the voice of the shepherd.

One of our struggles as a nation during these days is the plethora of voices giving us conflicting information. How is this virus transmitted? How long does it last on surfaces? Can we go out? How far must we stay away from people? Do I wear a mask or not? When will the number of cases peak? Who can be tested?

We hear a million voices as we watch the news and surf the internet. Many of them giving conflicting advice. Many of them contradicting themselves over and over and over. We have a president who says one thing and then the opposite and then claims he never said what he said even though it's been recorded for anyone to see and hear. It's as if we have multiple shepherds calling us toward every direction of the compass at the same time. Some trustworthy, some not.

How do we filter out the noise and hear what we need to hear? How do we find a way to manage all these voices, voices that are having an impact on our spirits.

Even in these days of washing hands and wearing masks, it's actually even *more* important for us to care for our spirits. Our spiritual health matters so very much during these days when we're rightfully concerned about so many things: our physical health, the health of others, our jobs, the jobs of our friends and colleagues, the health of the poor, both physical and economic the health of our country and our world.

In the midst of physical pandemic, we dare not let our spiritual health go without attention.

In church we're used to hearing about shepherds. The word "pastor" literally means "shepherd." It's not news that Jesus is our metaphorical shepherd. But Jesus says something here that gets passed over a lot. Jesus specifically refers to himself as "the gate." When sheep were kept in a pen, there was only one gate. That way one shepherd could protect an entire flock.

I think what Jesus is saying when he calls himself the gate is this: There are a lot of voices out there. Each of them calling out for our attention, our commitment, our devotion. But when Jesus says he's the gate itself, he's encouraging us to filter out those other voices, to deny them our commitment, and give Jesus both our *primary* attention and our *complete* attention. It's very similar to what we heard in last week's text when Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me."

Here's something else about a gate: Passing through a gate implies motion. We have to get up and move, *move* our spirits. *It takes energy and attention and intentionality to get through the gate.* The shepherd calls the sheep and they have to get up and move. There's a spiritual truth for us there as well.

How are you able to cut through the din of voices in your life right now? Do you have either a physical or metaphorical place to which you can go to find some quiet? Do you have a 3rd floor window desk isolated from the world?

In what ways is Jesus calling your name today? In what ways is Jesus' voice serving as a gate for you? What's keeping your spirit moving forward out of spiritual containment and isolation toward a new future?

The crazy thing is that we can continue to move forward even when we're sheltering-in-place. It just may be that our spirits can find even *more* room now to move forward than they could before.

My prayer is that you can find your own place where you can filter out the noise and hear the singular voice of Jesus, our shepherd calling each of us to move forward through the gate of Jesus' own presence.

May it be so,

Amen.