

**1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10**  
**April 26, 2026 (Reverend Giuseppe Mattei)**

One feature of small village life is that people live in close proximity to one another. They are somewhat familiar with each other's joys and tribulations and are there for each other. Children are raised by the whole village.

The story is told of a missionary to Africa who stopped at a small village on his round. The people of the village knew each other's sheep the way small village residents might know one another's children. As he sat in a group in the village, a person would stop by, "Have you seen my sheep so-and-so?" identifying his own sheep by name. Through the dark night he heard villagers calling out names. "They are calling their sheep," one of the locals told him. "They will all find each other."

John's gospel tells us that "the sheep follow [the shepherd] because they know his voice." (John 10:4) Recognizing the shepherd's voice requires *hearing*.

But *what* do we hear so that we might be able to recognize him? Certainly, it's not the sound of his voice, nor is it the message by itself. The sound of his voice we have never heard, and the message by itself might be captivating and

convincing, but does it come from a trusted source? Is it his?

So, more is required of us: what do we listen for when we hear the shepherd's voice? What are the criteria we use to assess, discern, and discriminate between truthful and deceiving messages? How do we know it's the shepherd's voice we hear, and not that of thieves and bandits? How do we know he is leading us to nurturing pastures and giving us abundant life? Is he coming to steal, kill, and destroy us?

Some discernment needs to inform our choices of hearing and following. Jesus instructs us: "By their fruits you will know them."<sup>1</sup> What do we see happening? Do we follow someone blindly and noncritically, naively taking in whatever is promised without scrutinizing past behavior, integrity of character, or looking for reasonable evidence?

We say that our faith in God is blind and rightly so. We trust our blind faith and surrender and commit to God because we personally know and trust the One calling us.

The shepherd of the parable has the well-being of the sheep at heart, rather than his own. There is a relationship of trust between shepherd and sheep. And the sheep are not dumb; they have good judgment and flee charlatans (Jn 10:5). They are able to smell trouble; they "know" whom to trust. When

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:16-20

the gate is open, they don't just rush out and escape and face the world alone: they follow the shepherd who goes before them and leads them with his voice. They feel safe and secure with the Good Shepherd.

God is faithful and trustworthy because God keeps promises and is in God's character to bless and enrich us: God has shown to be on our side time and again. God does not abuse our trust but makes sure we have what we need. We pray with full trust for God's providential care: "Give us today our daily bread."

God does not lie to us and does not cause us harm but is a steadfast foundation, never abandoning those who seek him. God does not take advantage of us or use us but gives us more than we deserve or can imagine, all that is necessary to live a life of dignity and integrity. God does not disappear when trouble comes but faces it with us, walks with us, suffers, becomes vulnerable, and dies with us.

Not so for thieves and bandits: they do not make other people's life abundant but subtract from it; they violate the sheep and only look after their own interests. They snatch and kill; they enrich themselves at others' expense. As the Psalmist observes:

Sinners don't respect God;  
sin is all they think about.

<sup>2</sup>They like themselves too much  
to hate their own sins  
or even to see them.

<sup>3</sup>They tell deceitful lies,  
and they don't have the sense  
to live right.

<sup>4</sup>Those people stay awake,  
thinking up mischief,  
and they follow the wrong road,  
refusing to turn from sin. (Psalm 36, CEV)

Thieves and bandits sow only misery. They are not afraid to use violence or the threat of violence to obtain what they seek; they force loyalty through bribe or fear. Thieves and bandits are prone to doing evil, showing disregard for life, and employing cruelty to set examples and to instill fear. They only take and destroy and leave anguish and despair in their wake. Greed motivates them.

Hearing Jesus' voice does not always happen easily even for those who are closest to him. Distractions, temptations, and ego-trips will cause us to lose sight of him, to wonder far and away, not being able to hear his calling voice. Attracted

by illusionary better shores, we struggle to find a way back. We end up being lost and vulnerable.

Thieves and bandits do not necessarily need to climb the fence to steal sheep. When that happens, it is easy for the sheep and the gatekeeper to identify evil intentions. Instead, thieves and bandits look for signs of weakness. They can wait for the opportune time: maybe the sheep gets distracted or wonders a little too far from the shepherd or gets entangled or injured or takes the wrong turn. Thieves and bandits can sweet talk, entice, and misguide.

Thieves and bandits are con-artists and know how to manipulate and confuse their victims. They sound and look interesting at first. After a while, if we know the Good Shepherd's voice, we realize we hear empty promises and are being fooled by thieves: truth thieves, reality thieves, values thieves, identity thieves.

Yet, the good Shepherd does not forget or abandon the lost sheep, nor does he get upset and punish her for causing him to worry or for wasting his time searching for her and getting her out of trouble. He's just glad to have her back.

Ultimately, no one will be able to snatch away from Him those who are His. We are safe in Him.

In a world where there is always someone seeking to gain something from us, isn't it comforting to hear that the Good Shepherd will lead and feed us; that he will take good care of us?

I just pray that I am not too obtuse, too deaf, too self-absorbed or too self-righteous to hear the voice of Jesus calling me to repentance, to revisit my choices, to come back to my senses, to come home.

Let us rejoice in the gift of his vigilance and protection. Let us trust his guidance and wisdom. Let us follow the voice of the One who knows us by name. Amen.