

“Voice Recognition”

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Sebastian Maniscalco’s comedy routine on doorbells describes a situation that is very similar to an experience from my childhood. It centers on how our reactions to the ringing of a doorbell have changed over the years. Twenty years ago, the doorbell was greeted with enthusiasm: someone has come for a visit! Quick, see who it is! Invite them inside and ask them if they would like a piece of cake and some coffee. These unexpected guests have brightened our day.

Unfortunately, our modern-day reactions to the doorbell are quite different: who is it? What do they want? Don’t open the door; look through the peephole first. Draw the curtains, turn out the lights – hide! Unexpected guests are greeted with suspicion and fear; we assume that whoever is at our door is a threat to our safety.

The doorbell routine is one of the many reasons why Sebastian Maniscalco has become one of our favorite comedians. He describes almost to the smallest detail life in my family, and how we would often be visited by family members who would drop by unannounced. No one ever called first; they simply got in their cars and drove over to our house. My mother always had a coffee cake in the pantry that was off-limits, because it was always “for company.” We would often return the favor; on a Sunday afternoon, my parents would announce that we were going over to my Uncle Richard and Aunt Hilda’s house; we’d get in the car and drive over to Martinsville, knowing that when we rang their doorbell we would always be warmly welcomed and offered a piece of their coffee cake. Doorbells in my family were unexpected delights and always brightened our days. But sadly, that’s changed for us; now the doorbell is an ominous sound that warns of danger lurking on the other side of the door. Especially in these days of social isolation, we wonder who could possibly be disturbing us, and we look out with great suspicion at what threats might be standing on our front porch.

While this change in the way we react to doorbells is regrettable, it is understandable, because we live in a world that is increasing filled with threats to our health and safety. With advancements in internet access and web portals, the dangers that threaten us are now not only physically on the other side of our front doors but virtually in many access points that can steal our identity, destroy our reputations, and threaten our very lives. We have been trained to react to messages on the phone or online with great suspicion, and we look for ways to verify that whoever has showed up unannounced physically or virtually really is who they claim to be. Sadly, we can no longer assume that whoever is ringing our doorbell has our best interests at heart.

Threats from imposters who pretend to be someone they are not are modern-day versions of the “wolves in sheep’s clothing” about whom Jesus warned his followers in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”* (Matthew 7:15-16). Jesus is aware of the threats that his followers will face from leaders who will appear innocent and sincere but who will dangerously mislead the church away from Christ’s mission for his people. The authenticity of a Christian leader is determined by whether or not they do *“the will of my Father in heaven”* (Matthew 7:21), whether or not they produce the “fruit” which Paul describes in his

letter the Galatians as “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” (Galatians 5:22-23).

- “How does one know whether under the artistic veneer lies true coin or false? The behavior of false prophets will betray their true character ... False face cannot hide false heart forever. Deeds will ultimately demonstrate nature. Certain actions follow inexorable from certain spiritual causes.” – Dale C. Allison.

Jesus expands this teaching on how to differentiate between a true and a false leader in today’s Gospel lesson from John, which includes one of his “I am” sayings that are scattered throughout the Fourth Gospel, a means through which Jesus both identifies himself and shine a light on the difference between the truth of the Word that he embodies and the falseness of the claims of those who would draw people away from the one who is “*the Way, and the Truth, and the Life*” (John 14:6). Using the image of a shepherd, a common metaphor for the leader of the people, Jesus identifies himself as the true shepherd who, unlike those who come “*only to steal and kill and destroy*,” comes so that those who follow him “*may have life, and have it abundantly*” (10:9-10).

Jesus’ opening statement “*very truly, I tell you*” marks the beginning of a new statement and a shift from the previous dialogue that Jesus was having with the Pharisees, who had been harassing a man who Jesus had cured of his blindness. After the Pharisees had driven him out of the community, Jesus seeks him out so that he might “*believe in the Son of Man ... and he worshipped him*” (9:35, 38). Jesus’ statement is challenged by the Pharisees, who are then addressed directly by our Lord:

- “Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see,” your sin remains.’” – 9:39-41.

Instead of continuing this dialogue with the Pharisees, Jesus moves to a teaching in which he identifies himself as the one whose presence is filled with light and life, who always has the best interests of those who follow him at heart, and whose teaching will always produce the fruit that is the Will of God. The image of the “shepherd” had commonly been used in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to kings and leaders of God’s people; but sadly, their unfaithful leadership had sullied the image of the shepherd to the point where the prophet Ezekiel proclaims God’s judgment on these leaders who fruits have proven them to be unworthy of leading God’s people:

- “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall my shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue the sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.” – Ezekiel 34: 7-10.

Instead of entrusting the people of God into the care of these false and unfaithful shepherds, the Lord declares through Ezekiel that “*I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.*” (7:11). This is the

prophecy that Jesus fulfills when he proclaims that “*I am the gate for the sheep ... I am the good shepherd.*” “I am” (*ego eimi*) literal means “I, I myself”; Jesus points to himself and emphasizes that he is the one who will now be the true leader of God’s people, the one who will care for them and guide them so that they might not fear but trust in his loving presence and faithful leadership.

The identity of Jesus as the true shepherd is established by first establishing who he is not: “*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.*” (10:1). The one who has “authorized access” (i.e. enters by the gate) is the shepherd; the one without authorized access, who seeks to come into the sheepfold by some nefarious means, is a thief and a bandit, one who comes to harm rather than to protect. The fact that the shepherd has authorized access is confirmed when “*the gatekeeper opens the gate for him*” (10:3); the authenticity of the relationship between sheep and shepherd is confirmed when “*the sheep hear his voice,*” when they recognize the shepherd’s voice as the one who “*calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*” The sheep “*will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers*” (10:5); they will follow the true shepherd because his they recognize his voice as the one who they can trust will lead them “*in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*” (Psalm 23:3).

The author of the Fourth Gospel identifies Jesus’ words as a “figure of speech” (*paroimia*), a way of speaking that encompasses, but is not limited to, a particular literary form such as a parable or proverb. The Pharisees, however, “*did not understand what he was saying to them*” (10:6). Read in the context of his encounter with them in the previous chapter, it seems clear that Jesus is positioning the Pharisees in the role of thief, bandit, and stranger. Their conduct toward the blind man who Jesus had healed (“*They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.*” – 9:34) has demonstrated that they do not have the flock’s best interests at heart, whereas Jesus’ conduct has shown him to be the shepherd who comes to the sheep and to whom the sheep respond. They have proven themselves to be the “wolves in sheep’s clothing” whose falsehood is known by their fruits.

- “These characters seem to represent other voices and pressures that attempt to turn the people of faith away from their calling. Both are evasive and slippery characters. They might even be persuasive. But in the final analysis, their aim is to destroy the flock for their own self-interest, rather than lead it along the true path. The same may be said for the wolf, who represents a particularly dangerous, demonic force that is capable of devouring the flock. As long as the sheep respond to the voice of the good shepherd, they will be protected from these forces.” – Dennis E. Smith.

Jesus continues his teaching, stating “*very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep*” (10:7). When Jesus identifies himself as the gate for the sheep, he point to the ways in which one’s place in the sheepfold, and hence one’s identity as a member of the flock, is determined exclusively by one’s relationship to Jesus as the gate. One enters the fold through Jesus. Those who enter the fold by ways other than the gate are thieves and bandits; but the sheep do not listen to them, because they recognize that they are imposters. Jesus alone is the means of salvation: “*whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.*” (10:9). The promise of entering through the gate to find salvation echoes the teaching of Psalm 118 and identifies Jesus as the point of access to God:

- “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.” – Psalm 118:19-20.

Discerning the truth or falsehood of those who claim to be authentic leaders of God's people focuses on their true intentions: whereas "*the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy*," the true shepherd is one who comes "*that they may have life, and have it abundantly*" (10:10), one of the central affirmations of the Gospel:

- "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." – 3:16.
- "I have given you an *eternal* life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." – 5:24.
- "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." – 20:30-31.

Such "abundant life" is the blessings that we receive from our true shepherd that ensure us that we have been "*given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...*" (1 Peter 1:3-4). It is the good news that "*if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*" (2 Corinthians 5:17) and we are baptized in the name of "*him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imaging, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and ever*" (Ephesians 3:20-21). The true shepherd does not promise us material abundance or freedom from trials and tribulations; the one who comes to bring abundant life does not offer immunity from what might endanger us, including the current virus. The presence of the true shepherd assures us that "*every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*" (James 1:17).

- "Abundant life is not about what we have. It's not about what we get. It's not about what we claim. Ultimately, abundant life is about what we receive as a gift from the Lord and to live knowing we are stewards of the blessings of God ... At the end of the day, perhaps that is how we know we have an abundant life – when we have shared our life with others. When we have enough of the blessings of God (mercy, peace, love, grace, wisdom, etc.) to share with others, and then actually do it; that's when we truly have abundant life." – Ed Stetzer.

"Someone's knocking at the door, someone's ringing the bell." – Paul McCartney.

Sebastian Maniscalco's observational humor reminds us that we no longer live in an age of innocence when we can assume that a doorbell is always a welcome sound. We need to be careful about who we let in, because many of those who seek access to our homes and our lives are thieves and bandits who come "*only to steal and kill and destroy.*" We need to listen carefully to their voices, to their words and the meaning behind them, so that we might discern – as sheep discern the voice of their shepherd – whether or not they are truly the voice of God, the words of the one who comes to bring us life, the one who will lead us as a good and faithful shepherd leads the flock. We know that the voice we hear is truly the Word of God through our knowledge of Scripture, through the Word that is "*a lamp to our feet and a life to our path*" (Psalm 119:105), the Word that helps us identify the voice of the Lord when he is knocking at the door:

- "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on the throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." – Revelation 3:20-22.

While we need to be careful about who is knocking at the door, when we hear the voice of our Lord, the one who is our Good Shepherd, it is a sound that can be received with joy; for our true shepherd has come that we may have life, and have it abundantly. Our Lord is knocking at the door; our Saviour is ringing the bell.

Open the door – let him in!

Amen.