Dear Parishioners,

*Intro:* Jesus is the Good Shepherd and invites us to follow Him to green and verdant pastures. He has come so that we might not just survive but thrive. In leading us to such pastures He is offering not just us, but the entire world where abundant life is to be found.

*The Voice of Jesus*

 I have a friend who likes to share stories of growing up on a farm during the era of the Depression. It was big enough for a few cows, some chickens and a large garden. While her father continued to work elsewhere, the farm work fell upon the children. It was the job of the girls to milk the cows. Each morning, before school they would go about this task and again after school. One day, they were sick in bed and it was the task of the father until the girls got back on their feet. The very first day, their father went to the barn and then came back to the house, just furious. The cows hadn’t dropped their milk for him. His wife told him that the secret was to sing to the cows as they were being milked. The cows were so used to the sound of music. Well, their father vowed to never sing to some dumb cows. In the end, he relented and took an old portable radio to the barn, tuned into a station that played soothing music and he was able to milk those cows.

 As incredible as this may seem, animals do rely on voice recognition. In biblical times and even in parts of our world today, animals belonging to various families share a common pen. In the case of sheep, especially when there are 200 or so in the same pen how would a shepherd be able to pick out his own- especially if many looked alike? How would the shepherd recognize their sheep from the others? It was the sheep who did all the work- the shepherd stood at the pen’s gate and either called or sang and his sheep came to him. They knew that voice and sought out their shepherd. And likewise, when it’s time to bring the sheep from the pasture to the pen, he would repeat calling out and the sheep followed.

 This Gospel makes me wonder, what kind of voice did Jesus our Good Shepherd have? I can only imagine that He spoke with a voice that was measured and gentle- not harsh but at the same time wanting to impress upon his listeners that He was both serious and honest. I can’t imagine Him using it to either soften or apologize for His message. And most importantly, it was and is a voice that is very distinguishable from all the other voices of the world.

 His is a voice that is comforting and reminds us that we don’t need wealth or power nor do we have to literally keep up with our neighbors. It’s a voice that tells us to be content with what we have and to appreciate all that we have- especially the relationships of family and friends. That’s how we measure our true wealth. It’s a voice that reminds us that it is better to serve than to be served.

*Learning to Distinguish His Voice*

 We learn to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd in many different ways. First, He speaks to us through something called conscience. **We don’t have to be theologians to know the difference between right and wrong.** We know when we hurt someone by our words and actions. This is not something that comes from outside of us, but within us.

 The voice of the Good Shepherd leads to prayer- we can ask the Lord: “Where am I going?” or “How can I be a better Catholic to my family and my world?” or even “How can I better serve You, as I serve others?” Those are difficult questions because it is no matter a question of what I want but what the Lord wants. We have to be willing to trust in the Lord and trust that he will not fail us.

*Verdant Pastures*

 Where do we find sheep in most parts of the world? Mostly on land that cannot support cows and horses. They are able to live where food is scarce or the land too harsh for larger animals. The Good News is that Jesus is not content to see His sheep barely survive, He wants them and us to thrive. He wants us to be healthy and robust, not scrawny and anemic. So, the pastures that He leads us to are not scorched by the summer’s heat, but where there is truly a feast set before us.

 And as He journeys with us, He commits Himself to us- as we have seen on Good Friday, giving up Himself for the sake of the sheep. Other shepherds might run away at the nearest sign of danger since they are not willing to die for some dumb sheep, but not Jesus. He sees us not as dumb but as loved and worth saving. Perhaps that is why the image of the Good Shepherd has made such a mark not only on the people of the Old Testament, but for us today.

The Lord leads us to verdant pastures of our Catholic faith where we find such delectable treats as the Sacred Scriptures, the Sacraments, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, the councils and the various Eucharistic Feasts and Holidays that are provided in abundance, but for most of us have scarcely sampled.

*Our Response*

 Our response to the Voice of the Good Shepherd is to follow where it leads us. Last Sunday was World Day of Prayer for Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life. This parish has had a rich tradition of priests and sisters committed to serving you! It’s a wonderful thing to hear how they touched the lives of many at St. Michael’s through their involvement in the school and parish. We might even say that they were Heaven sent. However, they didn’t just drop down from Heaven, but they were a blessing to us. Priests and Religious Sisters, Brothers and Priests were nurtured within a family, not much different from your own. At some point in their lives, they heard the voice of the Good Shepherd calling them to go beyond themselves in order to serve Christ and His Church.

 Although they have left us for more verdant pastures, their spirit remains within this parish community. Their spirit is alive and well in the teachers of our parish school who seek to pass on the faith as did their predecessors. Their spirit is alive and well in those who visit and bring Holy Communion to the sick and homebound as those before them once did. And their spirit is alive and well in all who are willing to sacrifice their time, talent and even treasure in order to build up this parish community. They have set a high bar for us to follow.

 In this extraordinary time, we have a unique opportunity to really listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, calling us to follow Him and to continue what He began some 2,000 years ago. Yet we turn to the Good Shepherd as a model of how we need to live our lives- not just as priests and religious, but all of us. How can we reach out to those in need during a time of pandemic? How can we offer our lives in service to Christ more fully once this crisis is over? Let us use this time to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and, with trust in Him, commit ourselves to serving Him now and in the future.

*Around the Parish*

 We continue to plan for the future. This week, we will begin discussing the parish budget for next year. This will be a challenging task since there are so many questions surrounding the future. We don’t know when we will be able to return to Mass nor how it might take place. We don’t know if we will even feel comfortable to return once permission is given. And we don’t know if we have to do this stay at home in the fall or winter. I ask for your prayers as members of the Finance council work toward creating a parish budget for next year beginning on July 1.

 The parish school is accepting students for next year. We have at this point, 19 verbally committed Kindergarteners for the new school year. Not all may come, but if they do, this will mark one of the larger kindergarten classes in recent years.

 The church continues to remain open for prayer from 10:00am - 6:00pm. Everyone is invited to make a visit before the Blessed Sacrament. The parish office is open on a limited basis- if you need to come in for something, it would be helpful to call ahead.

 I will be available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If you want to go to confession, I ask that you call and schedule a time and a place where we can be socially distant and yet private.

*Coming Back to Mass*

 Many have asked if a date for returning to Mass has been announced- not yet. Recently, **our bishop has stated**: “We will continue to abide by the directives of the public health and civil authorities.” He also mentioned that all public Masses and all other liturgical and devotional services will be cancelled through May 17, 2020.

However, on the **website of the Diocese of Lansing**, it states: “Over the coming days, Bishop Boyea will be finalizing guidelines as to how parishes may safely re-open public Masses on May 18. This will include advice on maintaining social distancing which we will see the capacity of church buildings reduced. There will also be advice on maintaining good hygiene for those in attendance at public Masses including clergy and lay faithful.”

  “As with other aspects of public life, the effectiveness of our social-distancing and hygiene guidelines at our public Masses will be monitored,” said Jeremy Priest.

“We are not precisely sure at this stage what our future practice will look like as the weeks and months progress but it’s our intention to move things forward as safely as we can.”

 **From the Gaylord website, the bishop wrote the following**: “On April 24, 2020, Governor Whitmer extended the “Stay Home, Stay Safe” executive order for the entire State of Michigan through Friday, May 15, 2020. Therefore, in cooperation with our local authorities in keeping the people of our diocese, parishes and institutions safe during this time of pandemic, I extend the validity of the decree issued on April 3, 2020, through Friday, May 15, 2020. This extension includes all dispensations previously granted. While suspension of public Masses will continue through Friday, May 15, I urge local parish leadership and communities to continue their use of social media as well as finding other creative ways to promote our Catholic faith and the bold proclamation of the Gospel of Christ.

“As a sign of hope, I have established an interdisciplinary working committee to help prepare principles, norms and guidelines to assist parish leaders and communities in opening our churches to public worship, celebration of the Sacraments, and parish activities when it becomes safe to do so. This step is a great indication that we are beginning to see some light at the end of the coronavirus tunnel.”

 I am aware that some bishops out west have lifted the ban on public Masses- with such restrictions as social distancing and those with underlying health problems, may not be able to attend.

 All I can say is stay tuned and that the time of gather once more as a community seems near. Please continue to pray for an end to this pandemic, for those who have been infected, for those who treat them and for those who lost their battle to this disaster. Please stay safe and practice the guidelines laid out for us by our health officials.

Peace, Fr. Tom