I'm not sure if anyone in our congregation has ever herded sheep, so we may or may not relate to the imagery in the story Jesus told about protecting sheep. The closest experience we might have is taking care of our pets, maybe a dog or a cat who depends on us to feed them.

A friend of mine is in poor health and wheelchair-bound, and every time he calls me on the phone, he raises his concern about who will take care of his kitties if he dies. He asked if I would take them, but since he lives in another state, getting them here might be a challenge, plus, as I explained to him, my dog would think they were toys for him to play with, and they wouldn't survive. In his most recent phone call to me, he thought of a possible solution: if he dies, he asked the vet to euthanize his cats to place in his casket.

That may seem like an extreme solution, and yet, he knows that someone needs to care for his cats if he's not around. It's a bit like Jesus telling his disciples about caring for sheep. Listen to this story from John's Gospel, told in a different manner, with your eyes closed. Place yourself in the story, and imagine who you are in the setting—one of the sheep, the one stealing the sheep, the gatekeeper, the hired hand, or the shepherd. With whom do you identify?

> "Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it."
>
> "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary. A hired man is not a real shepherd. The sheep mean nothing to him. He sees a wolf come and runs for it, leaving the sheep to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf. He's only in it for the money. The sheep don't matter to him. (John 10:1-5, 11-13, *The Message*).

Turn to someone near you and describe where you found yourself in the story, or type your thoughts on Facebook if you're watching alone. Did you find yourself

connecting with the sheep, the rustler, gatekeeper, hired hand, or shepherd? *(Pause)*

I don't know about you, but this past year I've felt like one of sheep that has been scattered away because a thief or wolf. The intruder is a virus that has entered the sheep gate, and some days I wish I could run away like the hired hand who left the sheep. Have you felt yourself disoriented, feeling a bit lost, wishing you could run away to somewhere else and leave all your responsibilities behind?

You may have felt like Charlie Brown in the Peanuts comic strips when he says, "There's no problem so big that I can't run away from it." Watching sheep is hard enough without also having to protect them from an intruder.

> The late Dr. Wallace Hamilton, novelist and playwright, liked to tell of an Indian sheep farmer who had a big problem. His neighbor's dogs were killing his sheep. It got so bad, he had to do something. So he examined his options. First, he could have brought a lawsuit and taken his neighbor to court. Second, he could have built stronger fences so the dogs couldn't get in. But he had a better idea. He gave some lambs to his neighbor's children.

> When these lambs began to multiply and their little flocks began to develop, the neighbor tied up the dogs and his problems were over.[1]

Even when life seems filled with chaos, God offers us options for dancing with the sheep rather than running away. When a pandemic sent us into quarantine a year ago, some began to learn the practice of solitude, discovering how to dance in God's Presence, learning patience through each step.

When masks and the vaccine became available, many have learned to dance with the science behind these protective tools, offering many the ability to venture beyond their limited confines and try new steps.

Even during a pandemic, hope has sprung forth from a different virus—a dance in South Africa that has gone viral and spread across the globe. The song "Jerusalema" by DJ and record producer Master KG was released in late 2019 and became a viral sensation in mid-2020. He says, "The words came out of nowhere," and he said he wanted it to be a spiritual song that brought hope, but he never imagined it would spread the way it did.

One person posted a comment on YouTube after listening to the song, "In times of a global pandemic. Everyone felt it would affect Africa the most. Yet it was Africa that soothed the globe with a spiritual song." One man living in Florida commented, "I have watched several of the dance challenge videos, mainly because I really like the song, and I just watched another, but for some reason I got so emotional by the end of the song, I have tears running down my cheeks, without understanding a single word, or knowing what language it was, I just love the music."

The words of the song echo the ancient prophets who envisioned a new Jerusalem who hoped for a better day when suffering ends, when beauty surrounds us, and when we all are one. A translation of the Zulu words of the song mean: "Jerusalem is my home. Please go with me, please protect me. Don't leave me behind because Jerusalem is my home."

As we listen to this song and watch our dancers, I invite you to imagine that even when an intruder enters the sheep gate, that you remember the promise Jesus made to his disciples and to us after telling the parable about the sheep: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me" (John 10:14, CEB). Jesus knows you very well—your joys as well as your sorrows—and he invites you to dance with the sheep, knowing that God's love and care surrounds us all as we dance together.

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[1] As cited by Hal Brady, Dallas, Texas, "Making Order out of Chaos," *HomileticsOnline*, April 21, 1991.