

Discussing the statistics around the mental health crises among his age cohort, a young man said that the “whole world seems to be going through a panic attack.” He stopped himself and wondered if panic was the right word. “It’s like everything is in a crazy cycle,” he continued. “We seem to be bouncing back and forth between panic and boredom. Everything seems out of control and scary — and boring and dead — at the same time.” The end result of this artificial tension is the same as what comes after any kind of prolonged panic: paralysis and apathy. The boredom then seeks some semblance of life by stimulating the libido to the point of frenzy, which leads to more boredom, and the process starts again.

Panic is exactly the right word to describe our times. The word panic comes from the ancient Greek god Pan, the deity of shepherds, herds, and wild places. He represented wild power, the sort of violence that we see in the scarier aspects of nature. And maybe most importantly of all, he could induce mind-scrambling fear. He was, in other words, the god of panic.

The ancient historian Plutarch recounted how, around the time of Jesus’ birth, sailors heard a voice announcing, “The great Pan is dead!” Well, if Pan was ever gone, he’s back. Despite the fact that we live in more economic affluence and technological advancement than any generation before us, we also live in a time of generalized anxiety and resentment and fear — seen in our divided politics, our discredited churches, and our angry social media fights.

Contemporary sociologist Hartmut Rosa argues that much of our problem is that we now expect the world around us — including our own lives — to be predictable, directable, engineerable, and useful. Our smartphones reinforce that. We have access to virtually everything, or at least to everything virtual. The irony, he explains, is that this expectation of controllability is driving us crazy with “monstrous, frightening forms of uncontrollability.” What we are missing, he says, is what he calls “resonance” — the ability to be spoken to, affected, and changed by what we cannot control.

Bored panic and panicked boredom help clarify why the entire world seems to be throbbing with resentful culture wars—what philosopher Mark Lilla recently called “political nostalgia”: a longing for a supposedly lost golden age that results in raging against those who have supposedly stolen it.

A decade ago, I led a van full of American Christians on a tour of the biblical sites in Israel and Palestine. I couldn’t wait to show them one of my favorite places there: the mountains of what was once known as Caesarea Philippi. There, Jesus said to Peter, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). As I walked with my tour, I noticed a small group of Europeans dressed in all black, huddled together and murmuring as they looked at the ground. “Are they praying?” I asked our Israeli tour guide. He laughed and rolled his eyes. “Well, kind of,” he said. “Sometimes Neo-pagans want to come here because, you know, this used to be a special place for that kind of thing. This is where they once worshiped the god Pan.” The tour guide made fun of the modern-day Pan worshippers. “It’s all just made up, you know,” he said. “There are no real pagans left. Pan has been dead a long time, and he isn’t coming back.”

The place is known to Christians as Caesarea Philippi, but its modern name is Banias, an Arabic version of Panias, after the god Pan. The significance of the varied meanings of this place was highlighted in 2020 when an archaeological dig uncovered an ancient Christian church beneath the site dating to the AD 400s.

This is not surprising. After all, it would make sense to build a church where Jesus promised to do so — upon the rock. But the archaeologists found underneath that church yet another structure of worship, this one dating back to about 20 BC: a temple to the god Pan. A scholar explained to the press that the worship of Pan had happened in that place since at least 300 years before Christ. When Jesus spoke to Peter in Matthew 16, he did so over this ancient site of Pan.

Peter would have fought anyone who suggested he was a worshiper of Pan. In fact, he had been the first disciple to announce — there at Caesarea Philippi — that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God”, in response to Jesus’s question of *Who do you say I am?* More specifically, what Peter wanted was to save his life and the life of Jesus. He emanated the hypervigilance of the panicked, relying on a firing limbic system to assert dominance in the face of threat. Jesus, however, said the answer was not in engineering the future or in defeating enemies or even in guarding one’s own life; he said this: “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”.

At that place of panic at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus was unnervingly tranquil. We might think panic purveyors would suggest that Jesus didn’t know what was coming. But the outside world is too familiar with panic to think that. It can recognize the kind of “confidence” that is really the frantic bravado of Peter and distinguish it from the strange calmness of Jesus.

In describing the way of discipleship, Jesus used the imagery of sheep with a shepherd. The voice of the shepherd Jesus does not create panic. It destroys it. And the sheep respond to — resonate with — the shepherd’s voice, following him into an undiscernible and uncontrollable future (John 10:3–5). That can also be scary in its own way, but it’s the kind of scariness that leads us out of panic.

We cannot do much about the panic all around us. We cannot undo the kind of hot panic that manifests itself as political aggression, seeking to divide the world into friends to be rewarded and enemies to be defeated, powering the libido until we see other people as objects to be sexually or economically exploited. We also cannot do much about the cold kind of panic that prompts people to numb themselves to life with substances, achievements, or the burnout of detached cynics who have yielded to despair.

What we can do, though, is make ourselves reachable. We can pray for what Jesus called *ears to hear and eyes to see*. We can cultivate true meaning through worship, prayer, community, and immersion in the Bible. Such things cannot engineer meaning or holiness by their own power. But they can place us beside Peter where he once stood in the place of Pan. And there, we can hear the voice that changes everything.

The story is what it always has been. It’s Peter versus Pan. We can choose to save our lives or to lose them, to indulge our appetites or to cultivate longings for something better, to plan our futures or to entrust ourselves to the unknown. We can choose fleeting wins or eternal salvation. The query before us is *Who do you say that I am?* Only when we keep that question in mind can we look down and see the solid rock on which we stand and recognize that this is no place for panic.