



Message for Sunday, April 30, 2023
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 Preached at St. Mary's Episcopal Church
 Anchorage, Alaska



Today is what is commonly called Good Shepherd Sunday. It takes its name from the passages of scripture, in which Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.

But actually, this year, the three-year cycle of Gospel readings brings us *not* the passages in which Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd,” (those are verses 11-18), but the verses *just prior to that*, verses 1-10, in which Jesus uses a different metaphor – ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the *gate* for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.” (John 10: 7b-8).

I spent the better part of yesterday reading about a dozen sermons about this passage, posted by Episcopal churches in previous years,. And they were all very similar – interchangeable, almost.

Yes, they complained about the indignity of all us being compared to sheep, which we think of as rather mindless, stupid creatures.

¹ *Celedonius is the name tradition has given to the ‘man born blind’ on John Chapter 9.*

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Yes, they spent a considerable amount of time discussing what shepherds do in real life, and lamenting that no one in the modern world today seems to have much contact with actual sheep.

And yes, they made the point that “Jesus as shepherd” is a model for us of the one who brings life, safety, and exemplifies selflessness in the care and defense of others.

That was all good. But I found it striking that none of them did much to name the context of the imagery Jesus uses here.

So, hang with me for a bit, here. This may be a different message than the one you expected, or maybe hoped to hear this morning.

I’m going to take us back to the text of the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 34, where much of this imagery of shepherds and sheep is found. The context is one in which the rulers of Israel, whom the prophet calls “the shepherds of Israel” have flattered themselves with their religiosity, and their own delusions about how righteous they are. In Ezekiel chapter 33, God says to Ezekiel: “For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain. To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it.”

They sing along wistfully to the love song you sing, but still they do not rise to the challenge to actually love one another.

Ezekiel continues: The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So, they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

But Jesus preached this message recorded in John’s Gospel, about sheep and shepherds and gates and bandits and thieves - among the people of First century Palestine. They knew the immediate context for the images Jesus was using – that the shepherds were the rulers of Israel.

They also lived at the margins of the intersections of Hebrew and Greek and Roman cultures and worldviews. Homer, Plato, Aristotle, all who lived 3-8 centuries earlier, but prominent in the minds and lives of first century people - all these used the images of shepherds as a metaphor for their political leaders and those who followed them, all who likewise participated in and reinforced the dominant power systems of their day.

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In other words, this discourse of Jesus is a starkly political passage, wrapped up in subversive metaphors, so much so that his listeners at first say, *Wait! What?* And in this passage and in the passages that follow, but were not read aloud on this Sunday, Jesus doubles down on his message – piling up a confusing mound of metaphors of sheep, shepherds, gates, bandits and thieves.

Here, I think, is the key to understanding these passages: In John, throughout his telling of the Gospel, John is diligent in following a particular *sequence or method*: He gives a **sign**, initiates a **dialogue**, and then, in a **discourse** that follows, **Jesus interprets the sign**. Got that? **Sign. Dialogue, Discourse or interpretation. The meaning is found in an extended metaphor, but then revealed by Jesus to those who have “eyes to see.”**

We read and hear this passage on a Sunday morning as if it stands alone, but it does not stand alone or in isolation. Immediately before this - and John's Gospel was not originally written with chapter breaks - immediately before this is the sign – Jesus heals the man born blind. So significant is this sign that it takes up the entirety of the ninth chapter of the Gospel according to John. It is the single longest recorded conversation of Jesus in any of the Gospels, alongside the conversation between Jesus and the Syrophonecian woman at the well, with which it has many similarities.

So, Jesus's discourse on sheep, sheepgates, bandits, and the like is his interpretation of what exactly was going on in the miraculous sign on the healing of the man born blind. There is no way to understand this passage without the healing it interprets.

And what is the healing of the man born blind all about? Besides the obvious fact that Jesus heals, yes... that is central and highly consequential, indeed! – as it reveals who Jesus is. But even beyond the literal and the immediate physical healing, what is the deeper reality the healing of the man born blind points to? (Signs are signs because they point to something beyond themselves. That's actually what makes them “signs.”)

The man born blind was believed by “good self-righteous religious people” to be one who either sinned or whose parents sinned. Remember, the disciples begin by asking Jesus this precise question. As a consequence, the man born blind was excluded from mainstream society, kept in a third-class status, avoided by good proper folk who walked away to go around him, although the better souls among them might show some pity and might venture to put something in his hat, with which he begged for daily subsistence. His very existence offended their sense of “right and wrong.” He offended their sense of “purity.” He was made to be “the other.”

In John's telling of the story, it is ironically, the leaders and the people who are revealed to be “blind,” in their mistaken assumptions, and their failure to embrace this man's dignity and sacred worth. The only one who sees clearly is the man who was born blind himself. But Jesus' physical restoration of sight is not the greater miracle; the greater miracle is the healing of the community, that the man's separation is ended, and he is received back into the fellowship of family and community, although, we note, he still does not have the acceptance of the religious leaders. He will probably never gain the acceptance of some folks.

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So, lets go back now to Ezekiel. Who are the “false shepherds whom Jesus reveals to be but thieves and bandits? Yes, they are the false shepherds who fall short of their calling to love and care for others.

Could it be that they are **us**, anytime we act as gatekeepers of the flock, enforcing our own notions of purity and our false notions of what is and is not “sin”??

Who are the ones whom God has created in God’s own image and likeness, children of a loving God, and yet whom we fail to embrace as siblings? Who gets locked outside the gates we secure and defend?

Where in our lives have we “clothe[d] [our]selves with the wool, [and yet] slaughter the fatlings; but... ...do not feed the sheep. [where] have [we] not strengthened the weak, [or] healed the sick, [where] have [we] not bound up the injured, ...have not brought back the strayed, ...have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness ...have [we] ruled them.

Although I haven’t gotten explicitly political today, this passage from John’s Gospel is deeply political.

It calls us to stand in witness to the Gospel of Christ in standing against all that seeks to divide us from one another, children of God and siblings in Christ Jesus. It calls us to bring sight to those who as yet cannot see the image of God in others, and oftentimes, in themselves.

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And to those of you who have been excluded, or who are excluded still today... to you kids who are struggling with your sexuality and gender identity, to you, their families and loved ones, to you who have never known welcome because of who you are and who you were created to be, to you whom the world has misunderstood for any reason – because you were born in a body that was atypical or departed from the desired cultural norms of “beauty” and “desirability”, too old now to be noticed, too skinny or too large, too black or too brown, or born female in what is still in many ways largely a man’s world, too poor or too rich, know that God does not gate-keep as the world gate-keeps.

The One who is the Good Shepherd sees you as you are, and knows you as the Beloved. The beloved. The One Who is Loved. Know that Love. Be that Love in the world. Cast not your eyes on the bandits and the thieves of belief who at times seem to run this world. Although, even for them, that is – *for us* – there is hope and healing.

There is a deeper truth than that of the world and its culture of exclusion and constant gate-keeping. There is a deeper love that endures. There are springs that bubble up with life – the fullness of life, in both this world and beyond the veil of tears. Know that you are loved.

Jesus said, “I came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Christ is the gate, and the gate stands open to welcome you home, Amen.

Scriptures Appointed for today:

The Collect

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The First Lesson - Acts 2:42-47

Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The Psalm - Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.

3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.

6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Epistle - 1 Peter 2:19-25

It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

The Gospel - John 10:1-10

Jesus said, “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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”