

## John 10:1-10 – April 30, 2023

Interpreting analogies is an important part of reading scripture. Because the Bible is full of them. Every one of Jesus' parables works by way of analogy. David uses analogies in the poetry of the psalms. Solomon uses analogies in the wisdom of proverbs. They're everywhere. And normally they need to be approached with at least a little bit of caution. Because, after all, you don't want to take the analogy too far.

But we don't have to worry about that today. Because today is the fourth Sunday of Easter. A day the church has informally titled, "Good Shepherd Sunday." And we set aside this particular analogy for its own special day of the church year because it the most common analogy in all of scripture.

The analogy of God's people as sheep and God as our shepherd is used almost one hundred times in the Bible to teach about God's relationship with his people. And when you use an analogy that many times and you take it in as many directions as God does throughout scripture, it's all but impossible for us to take it too far. The attributes are so fleshed out that you can do just about anything you want with it and there's a decent chance it's already been done somewhere in the Bible.

It's a special analogy. But more often than not, it's not a flattering one. Not for us at least. I'm no expert on shepherding or sheep or anything of the sort. But based on what the Bible gives us, I don't really have to be. Because, regardless of reality, the way that scripture describes sheep is not as intelligent, clean, obedient creatures worthy of honor and respect.

No, sheep go astray. They wander off and get lost easily. They're frequently distracted and tempted by their own desires, by their own weaknesses. They put themselves in dangerous situations and have no way to defend themselves. They're dirty. They'll trample their own watering hole and then go thirsty for lack of clean water. You can't even depend on a sheep to follow you home on its own. Sometimes you have to just pick it up and carry it around.

Over and over again in scripture, whenever God's people are in trouble, they look like sheep without a shepherd. Think about that for a second. It's not that they are sheep without a shepherd. But they look like sheep without a shepherd.

Sheep are so utterly dependent upon their shepherd to lead them and provide for them and protect them that when you see a sheep without a shepherd, it's blatantly obvious just by looking at it. The sheep is so desperate it doesn't even need to be able to speak to tell you that it's lost and alone.

I look at the world around us and I see sheep without a shepherd. Sometime I even look at the church and see sheep without a shepherd. Sometimes I look at myself and see a sheep without a shepherd.

Which really shouldn't happen. Because the shepherd is still there. I know I still have a shepherd. I know you still have a shepherd. I know the world around us has a shepherd waiting for them too. But when a sheep goes astray, it's hard not to look at it and just see a creature that is lost and alone. When we go astray, it's hard not to feel like a creature that is lost and alone.

And yet, there is one tiny redeeming aspect of sheep, which is what Jesus focuses on in our Gospel Lesson today: Sheep do eventually learn their shepherd's voice. After a shepherd has led them for long enough and provided for them for long enough and protected them for long enough, they will follow him.

Eventually, they will trust that shepherd above all others. Leave them alone and they'll scatter in a dozen different directions. Get themselves into all sorts of trouble. But call to them, and they'll come to a voice they trust.

And that's a really good thing. That's something that Jesus says we should make use of to keep us out danger. Because there is a thief who wants to steal and kill and destroy. There is a thief called the devil, who wants to steal away our faith, kill our souls, and destroy every blessing that God has given to us.

And just as Jesus makes use of under-shepherds – pastors like me – to do his work among his flock, the devil makes us of under-thieves, so to speak, to steal and kill and destroy. He makes use of the evils in this world and the evil people of this world and the evil forces of this world to tempt you in to doubt and despair.

They don't come to us through the gate. They don't come to us in Jesus' name. They don't speak with the voice of Christ through his Word. They climb in by another way. They speak to us with words of fear and words of hatred and words of pride. They look nothing like the Good Shepherd. They sound nothing like the Good Shepherd.

But you'll only know that if you know the Good Shepherd's voice. You see, that's really what Jesus is getting at here. You have to hear your shepherd's voice. You have to hear it in church, you have to read it in scripture. Over and over and over again.

You have to hear and read it because that's the only way you'll learn his voice. That's the only way you'll know when the thief is really the one who's calling. Even a sheep, a dumb, wandering, sinful sheep, can learn to follow their shepherd.

And when we do follow our shepherd, we don't just avoid the thief and his death and destruction. We also learn what our Good Shepherd is calling us toward. Because the shepherd's call is often to wonderful blessings.

To the blessings of Holy Communion shared together, like that of the first Christians. To the blessings of fellowship with other believers in prayer and song. To the blessings of charity and community and compassion. When the Good Shepherd calls us, we gather, just as they did in our reading from Acts. And great things happen. Because we are not lost and alone.

But the shepherd's call isn't always to blessings. At least not from our perspective. Because, you see, the Good Shepherd calls us to follow him not just through discipleship and ministry, but also through suffering and pain and even death. As our Epistle says, Christ suffered for you as an example that you should follow in His steps.

That's what our Lenten season was all about. Following the voice of our shepherd as he walked to the cross. Following the voice of our shepherd as he was reviled, as he suffered, as he was threatened, as he bore our sins on the tree, even though he committed no sin. Following the voice of our shepherd as He became one of His lambs. The Lamb of God whose death takes away the sin of the world. By his wounds you have been healed.

But then again, that's not just the message of Lent. It's also the message of Easter. The shepherd who became the gate for His sheep. So that we could follow His voice. Through blessings and trials. Through peace and through pain. Through joy and through sorrow. And finally enter through Him into the safety of the pasture. Where we are never lost and alone again. Enter through him and receive life. Life abundantly. Life in this life. Life in the next life. Life at the end of all things.

By the faith given us in Baptism and the Word, we have learned our shepherd's voice. We have heard His call. We have recognized Him as more than a thief or a stranger, but as the only one we can trust in this entire world. And this life we live is one continual exercise in hearing that voice and following that voice. Wherever He takes us. To food and drink and the safety of the flock. Or to danger and turmoil and death and resurrection.

We listen to His voice. We follow His voice. We return daily to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. Not because we know better. Not because we're so smart and we know what's good for us. We're sheep, after all. No, we follow for one simple reason. He is our Good Shepherd. We know Him. And he knows us. Each of us. By name. We are his own. And no one will snatch us out of his hand. Amen.