

Easter 4A 2026 John 10:1-10

Today's reading from Acts describes the very beginning of the church, made up of and led by the people who had experienced Jesus' life, teaching, and example first hand. Luke tells us that they set aside their individual interests, even to the point of selling their personal possessions, for the good of the whole group, to take care of any who had need. That is what the most authentic expression of Christian discipleship looks like; but of course, we know it didn't take them long to regress to the values and habits of the mainstream culture, because almost the entire rest of the New Testament is reaction, admonishment, and advice to churches that were already struggling to follow Jesus' example in one way or another. Over the centuries our faith communities have only rarely emulated the church of Acts; the one place I've always said we do that best is at church camp. For one immersive week, we gather young people who are different: different home towns and different home lives, different family structures, different socioeconomic backgrounds, different interests and abilities, and then we have them all do the same activities, eat the same food, sleep on the same bunks, swim in the same pool in order to practice living together in community where everybody is recognized as an equally beloved child of God. It's hard to build that kind of community organically among 11 year old strangers in just one week, so we speed up the process using activities where the campers take small, managed risks to give their cabin mates opportunities to earn their trust, sometimes to literally catch them when they fall. One of those activities involves campers taking turns being led around obstacles while blindfolded. It's not just a matter of trusting the guide to keep them from tripping on rocks or walking into trees; they also have to hear and discern that one voice amidst all of the other voices and noises that threaten to distract them and lead them astray. And that takes us to John's gospel, to Jesus, the shepherd whose sheep follow his voice.

Although this is a mixed and weird metaphor that Jesus uses, it does have a context. This is Jesus' reflection for his disciples on restoring the sight of the man who was born blind. If you remember back to Lent, that was one of those gospel stories that was so long I told you to sit back down while I read it, so I won't repeat it all again, but this is the one where the religious authorities are so unwilling to acknowledge Jesus' healing power that they interrogate the man and his parents, even question whether he really had been born blind or whether he was the same man or was someone else entirely, and, in the end, kick him out of the synagogue for following Jesus. Today's passage is Jesus' reaction to that incident.

After 2000 years of reading this and other passages about sheep, we associate scripture's shepherding imagery with Jesus, and sometimes by extension with pastors or bishops. If you noticed when Bishop Kevin was here he carried, as a symbol of his office, a crozier, which looks like a shepherd's crook. But in the ancient near east, both in Israel and in the nations

around Israel, it was not priests but kings who portrayed themselves as shepherds. They were supposed to protect and provide for their people in the same way that shepherds took care of their flocks. When Ezekiel declares the Lord's judgment on the shepherds, it's not literal shepherds he is criticizing but the unjust kings who anger God by feeding themselves instead of feeding the sheep, that is, abusing their position of trust and power by exploiting instead of caring for their people. The Lord, who was to be king gathers, feeds, and leads his own not just like any shepherd, but like a *good* shepherd.

As I said, Jesus muddles this metaphor a bit, putting himself in the position of both the shepherd and the gate for the sheep. Remembering the man born blind, when the authorities used their power to keep the man out, Jesus uses his power to welcome the man in. Jesus calls those who shirk their responsibility to the people *thieves* and *bandits* who would mislead the sheep. Whereas the path to which Jesus calls the sheep is faithful to the way and will of God, the way that leads to abundant life, the thieves who try to steal the sheep only come to kill and destroy. This is what Jesus' disciples just witnessed in his exchange with the man born blind: Jesus saved the man's sight and his relationship to his community; the authorities destroyed that connection and cut him off from communal life. Their resistance to Jesus' way made them the same as bandits who have no business in the sheepfold with the sheep.

Jesus' vision for his pasture is sheep who follow him because they know his voice. He assumes that his sheep won't listen to or follow or will even run from the thieves and the bandits because his sheep know the difference between the voice of strangers and his voice. But how do we discern the voice of the good shepherd and recognize the thieves and bandits for who they really are? A major theme in John's gospel is abiding in Jesus—remaining in relationship so that we know Jesus unmistakably. That looks like conversing with Jesus, which we do in worship and in study, when we pray to him and when he speaks to us; the gospels speak his words and show us his example; we can see what his way of abundant life looks like. The better we know his way—the way of generous, merciful, loving, selfless service that we read throughout scripture—the way that led the earliest church to put their self-interest aside for the good of all—the more obvious it should be when we encounter the thieves and bandits who steal and kill and destroy for their own gain. We can follow that way if we want to; plenty of people do; but we can't claim that's the way of Jesus. When we say, or in a minute, when we sing, *Savior, like a shepherd lead us*, may we take courage that we know the way—and the truth and the life—because Jesus has already taught it to us. As we face each new day and each new challenge, we can trust the Spirit not only to give us the wisdom to discern the Good Shepherd's voice, but also the strength to follow it to the Lord's abundant life.