

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

APRIL 30, 2023



John 10:1 Jesus assures us “that whoever doesn’t enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw.”

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RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP

ONE: How awesome to gather before God!

We are here to celebrate with wide-eyed wonder.

MANY: The God of all worlds is with us.

Praise God for this season of Easter.

ONE: Praise God for all the signs of new life.

Praise God for all we can do together.

MANY: Praise God for the life and ministry of Jesus.

Praise God for all who share that ministry today.

ONE: Christ came to offer us abundant life.

We are here today to reclaim that gift.

ALL: We gather in the name of Jesus Christ.

We want to follow in the steps of Jesus.

***INVOCATION:** Let us hear your voice today, O Shepherd. Call our names and claim us as your own. Lead us beside still waters and restore our souls. Comfort those who suffer pain and loss. Assure all who are afraid. Lead us in right paths for your name’s sake. We have known your goodness and mercy in so many times and places. We open ourselves now to receive these gifts again. Unlock within us the barriers that keep us from recognizing and appreciating all the evidence of your love that surrounds us. Amen.

***CALL TO CONFESSION:** The Scriptures compare us to sheep who have gone astray. As sheep seem not to see beyond the next tuft of grass, we seem to be

attracted to the immediate temptation. We become ravenous consumers rather than good stewards of God's abundance. Christ calls us to respond to the Shepherd's voice.

***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

O God, we do not want to admit that our possessions possess us. Yet we do seem captive to all the things we have acquired and all the things we want. We are reluctant to share too much, lest we be deprived of the comforts we cherish. We do not want to suffer for our faith. There are limits to our willingness to follow Jesus. O God, help us trust you beyond these limits. Amen. Silence

***ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:** God provides for us as a good shepherd provides for a flock of sheep, seeking green pastures and still waters for us even in periods of famine and drought. In fearful times, amid loss, the Shepherd's care is always available. Surely God's goodness and mercy will restore all who give up their own pretensions in order to live in community, with glad and generous hearts.

***GOSPEL READING: John 10:1-10**

10¹ I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. ²The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. ⁵They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice." ⁶Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying.

I am the gate

⁷So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. ⁸All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

These are the ancient words revealed to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

MESSAGE: “Our Shepherd is Calling Us”

I believe it always helps to know a little bit about the context of the scripture we are studying each time.

What’s the background story?

I read from chapter 10 of the Gospel of John. Before we go further, let’s look at what happened in Chapter 9. The question that dominated chapter 9 was: Is Jesus from God or not? Jesus had just cured the blind man and the religious authorities want to know how. Is Jesus from God or from Satan?

The man who now sees says his healer is from God and the others are more skeptical. They question if Jesus is from Satan.

More questions remain. Is Jesus a prophet or not? Is he the Messiah or not, the “son of man” whom God will set as judge over the world? Now here, in chapter 10 we have a parable about shepherds and sheep. What’s the connection?

The answer is that in the Bible the picture of the shepherd with his sheep is frequently used to refer to the king and his people.

In our modern world we don’t think of rulers and leaders in quite that way. We think of people running big companies or the presidents of banks and transnational corporations. We think of people sitting behind desks, dictating letters or chairing meetings.

Often such people are quite removed from most of those who work in the organization. They seldom see them face to face, and probably don’t know the names of very many.

But in the Bible the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd, perhaps modelled on the shepherd-boy David, who became the king after God’s own heart.

In a world where they knew about the intimate contact and trust between shepherd and sheep, this was their preferred way of talking about kingship.

This is the image that Jesus chooses to explain his own claim to be the true king of Israel. There is a tendency for Bible readers to hurry on to verse 11, where Jesus calls himself “the good shepherd”, but we should notice that in these first five verses he doesn’t mention himself directly.

He is talking, as it were in the abstract, about the difference between true shepherds and false ones.

Let's listen to those verses again –

¹ I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. ² The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. ⁵ They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice."

Who are these false ones, these "thieves and outlaws", these "strangers"? Jesus certainly has in mind the various leaders who had emerged during his own lifetime.

Some, whom we might call revolutionary leaders or warlords, were eager to lead Israel into confrontation with the imperial powers. Others, particularly the house of Herod, were eager to submit to Rome as long as that meant keeping their own power and wealth.

Jesus is posing the question: how will you tell God's true, appointed king when he comes? That's a

good question for us, also. How will we tell God's true appointed king when he comes?

The answer is that you can tell the true king the same way you can tell the true shepherd. Anybody can turn up in Jerusalem and give himself airs as a leader. But only the one who comes by the way God has appointed has the right to do so.

Think about it. Anyone can call followers: movie stars, musicians, politicians. But the sign of the real king is the response that comes from the heart, when people hear this king's voice and, in love and trust, follow him.

The parable of these first five verses, it seems, is designed to say: this is what I'm doing; this is what gives substance to my claim to be sent by God as Israel's true king. The fact that people are hearing me and following me – notably the man born blind – is the sign that God has sent me.

But, faced with blank stares (deer in the headlights look) from his audience, Jesus continues with further explanations.

The first of these further explanations, are in verses 7-10. They highlight another part of the shepherd's role. He is the gate, or door. Just to explain; In many Eastern sheepfolds, the shepherd

lies down at night in the gateway, to stop the sheep getting out and to stop predators getting in.

Here **Jesus** seems to indicate the way in which the shepherd keeps the sheep safe. In Psalm 121.8, we can read that God watches over their going out and their coming in.

The emphasis is on the safety, and the fulfilled life, of the sheep. The shepherd has no business looking after his own interests. His priority are the sheep. Find a king like that, and you've found the Lord's anointed.

The promise of full life, full to overflowing, is as relevant for us today as it was then. The modern Western world has discovered how unsatisfying materialism really is, and is looking for something more, something beyond.

Many thieves have told lies, and have deceived the sheep, stolen them and left them for dead.

To be one of the true sheep in Jesus' flock, we cannot leave the group. We must remember that Jesus will look after us and take care of us if we stay.

We should not go looking for greener pastures all by ourselves. We must remember that Jesus knows where the best places are to get fed.

We might get lost if we wander away on our own or start to follow a different shepherd who is not as trust worthy. No matter how big his flock is, Jesus will come looking for us to come back to the flock of Jesus where we will be loved and cared for.

Most of all we must remember the voice of Jesus, the words of Jesus, the work of Jesus, the healings by Jesus, the call of Jesus.

The call today to be Jesus' true sheep is to listen for his voice, and to find in him and in him alone the life which is overflowing life for sure. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER:

"Such perfect love my Shepherd shows, whose goodness fails me never. Whose hand all things I need bestows and watches me forever."

These words were written by Henry W. Baker in 1868 and can be found in the NCH 248.

We thank you dear Holy One for giving us poets such as Mr. Baker and hymn tunes written by John Dykes. They speak to us when we have no words. And we are grateful.

We thank you for the talents the people in the church have and share with the whole congregation;

whether it be music, phone calls, secretarial tasks, building and grounds tasks. They give to our church these gifts so this can be a vibrant and thriving church.

Today we remember all those affected by recent storms, tornadoes, floods, and other disasters. May they keep the faith as they help each other find new realities in their lives.

Please, O Holy One, bring your healing spirit to those with health problems, physical or mental. May they know they are not alone. You are always with them.

We pray for all those on our prayer list as they struggle for health and wholeness.

All these things we pray as our voices together say the prayer your son taught us . . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

***UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:**

Thank you, God, for the abundant life we enjoy, not in the things we possess but in the relationships you offer and the opportunities for sharing that you provide. May all that we now dedicate to you be distributed in ways that meet human need and offer praise to you. Extend our outreach beyond our vision, that we may live in awe and wonder before you, marveling before your goodness and mercy. Amen.

***RESPONSIVE BENEDICTION:**

ONE: You have been claimed by God, our Good Shepherd. Know God, not as a stranger, but as friend.

MANY: God is our shepherd; we shall not want.

God leads us daily and restores our souls.

ONE: Easter continues, for Christ lives in us.

Jesus came that we might have abundant life.

MANY: Daily we receive God's goodness and mercy.

Our cups overflow with God's generosity.

ONE: Let us devote ourselves to the apostles'

teaching. Let us pray and break bread together.

MANY: We find our lives in giving them to others.

In Christ, we discover the joy of service.

Amen. **Amen**