

**Psalm 23**  
**John 10:1-10**

**Listening Skills**  
*First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL*  
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**Easter 4**

The Lord is my shepherd. Today is often considered Good Shepherd Sunday. You may have already noticed that theme permeating our worship - we're living it up today with shepherd hymns and scriptures. On this particular Sunday every year - that is, the Fourth Sunday of Easter - our lectionary, the outline of Bible passages that lead most congregations around the world through a better part of the Bible - always includes scripture about the Good Shepherd. This year is no exception.

Except that our scripture lesson for this morning doesn't include the very next verse of John in which Jesus indeed claims to be the "Good Shepherd." That's saved for next year. Instead, today we are exploring Jesus' claims to be a shepherd and also to be the gate. We get two metaphors for the price of one, because, as the text tells us, those who were listening did not understand Jesus, and even the teacher - he tried several different ways of explaining.

Let's start with the shepherd. For a lot of us urbanites in this modern world - a shepherd is not exactly a metaphor we can easily relate to from our context. There aren't too many sheep hanging out in downtown Birmingham. In fact, as one online writer put it, the image that comes to mind when you say "shepherd" is actually that of cute, freshly-scrubbed, cherub-faced children in Christmas productions with towels tied to their heads wearing striped bathrobes and carrying shepherd's crooks. Little shepherds who need a lot of herding themselves! I think it's safe to say this wasn't the image Jesus or any of his hearers had of shepherds in first-century Palestine!

Now I also think about the images we have in our minds of *Jesus* as shepherd. Whenever I hear these passages, I'm reminded of the Renaissance-like, Hallmark images of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, *very clean* Jesus carrying a beautiful white lamb over his shoulders, sometimes in a field, other times through clouds. Again, this image is not even close to the reality of what first-century hearers would have thought of when Jesus spoke of the shepherd.

In fact, shepherds were anything but cute...or clean, for that matter. These were men whose very livelihood depended on their dedication to the flock of sheep. They were required to spend a great deal of time with the herd - to keep the sheep safe from human and animal predators alike, and to keep the sheep from wandering. Shepherds tended to not be at the top of the list of eligible bachelors because they had to spend so much time with the flock and away from home. Also, it's speculated that they probably didn't smell so great - at least to humans - because of all the time they spent with the sheep. But they were willing to face the same dangers and hardships as their flocks - extreme temperatures and predators, all the while leaving their families vulnerable at home, as well. Shepherds were rugged men, prepared to defend the flock from any danger, and willing to give up many creature comforts for the sake of their sheep.

And shepherds knew their sheep well. The herds of sheep were not primarily used for meat or sacrifice, but rather for their wool. So shepherds could be with the same flock for many years. Often they would name their sheep - descriptive names like "Brown-Ears" or "Spotted One" -

and the sheep would come to know the voice of their shepherd and be able to distinguish it from other human voices. So when several shepherds would gate their sheep together in a sheepfold at night for safety – in the morning, the sheep could and would indeed come back together as one herd when their shepherd called to them. Hence Jesus' metaphor...

But Jesus also speaks of himself as the gate – as the one who will save the sheep and let them go in and out to pasture. In other words, the one who will give the sheep the nourishment and refreshment they need to live – and to live abundantly. This metaphor may not be that different from the shepherd metaphor. There are some historical accounts that suggest that shepherds would come across sheepfolds – that is, walled-in spaces – that they could house and protect their sheep in for the night, but there would only be an opening for the sheep to go in and out of – no gate. So, the shepherds would themselves sit or lay down in the opening in order to keep the sheep enclosed safely – thus themselves becoming the gate.

And I'd like to think that we can see Jesus in this more historically accurate portrayal of the shepherd. To see him as one who would brave the elements and go to uncomfortable places with us – one who would guide and protect us. One who would make himself just as vulnerable as we already are – yet is also more powerful than our deepest imaginings, one who knows our name. Yes, this is a Jesus I can believe in.

Admittedly, the whole metaphor of the gate can be problematic for us as the church. Not only do we have our own difficult history with gate-keeping – deciding who's "in" and who's "out" – but it's a discussion that is still taking place on multiple levels. Even more so, sometimes this passage is one of those used to defend the idea of a more exclusive church – a misread of the text if I ever heard one. God reaches out to us and calls us to the gate – who is to say who is in the herd and who is not? Only God in Jesus Christ. We do not determine who comes through the gate and who does not. Indeed, if we attempted to do so, *we* could be called thieves and bandits and strangers with strange voices that would cause the sheep to scatter instead of finding their way to the pasture to be nourished.

So, how are our listening skills? How well do we hear the shepherd calling? How often do we travel through the gate and live into the abundant life to which Christ calls us? If we confess Jesus as Lord here in this place and for our lives, then our faith is the basis upon which the rest of our life is built. Yet there are often competing voices in our lives that obscure the sound of Jesus the Shepherd, as Sarah Dylan Breuer, noted lectionary blogger says. Voices like our boss at work, parents, society at large, politicians, material things, our ambitions, that one more favor that we just couldn't say "no" to, one more promotion to get, one more enemy to defeat before we can finally sit back enough to pay attention to the voice of our faith. Bob Dylan hit the nail on the head in his song, *Gotta Serve Somebody*: "You might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk, / Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk, / You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread / You may be sleeping on the floor, sleeping in a king-sized bed. / But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed / You're gonna have to serve somebody, / Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you're gonna have to serve somebody." And those who try to claim lordship in our lives keep us penned in by making promises of protection that only seem to fuel our anxiety and never do the trick: that we'll be happier once we get that promotion, that she'll like me better if I do this one last favor, that our nation will be safe if we

just continue to fight, that if we have that plasma flat-screen television we'll feel fulfilled. None of these promises ultimately lead to any kind of abundant life, or as another translation puts it – fullness of life. As Martin Luther, noted Reformation theologian says, “whatever you set your heart on and rely on is really your god.” It is as we walk beside the still waters and are nourished by the pastures that the Shepherd leads us to that we can begin to taste life in fullness and have all we need – food, water, air, true security, deep rest and real love.

But how do we listen for the voice of our Shepherd? Well, in many ways, we continue what we are doing right now: worship, pray, delve into the Word of God, seek out the community of faith. But more subtly, I think part of what helps us to hone our listening skills is to constantly be checking the foundation upon which we base our life choices: do we operate out of fear or anxiety or in response to societal or professional pressures? Or do we make those life decisions through the lenses of faith? Because the reality is, all those competing voices aren't going away, nor can they all be ignored. But they don't have to be the very center of our being. For in our center we can know that God is indeed leading and guiding us through Jesus Christ, and that each and every one of our names are known.

And trying to alter our mindset or enhance the foundations upon which we live is not something that we do in a vacuum. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “You cannot follow the shepherd all by yourself...you are stuck with the flock.” We are stuck with one another – here to help guide one another, to help each of us remember that “The Lord is [our] shepherd,” to be the voice of the shepherd for each other when we can't hear it for ourselves. You and I are stuck with the flock – and together may we find our way to green pastures where we “shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

And now, all glory and honor be to God – Three in One – now and forevermore, amen.

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Resources:

[www.sarahlaughed.net](http://www.sarahlaughed.net) – the lectionary blog of Sarah Dylan Breuer

“Gotta Serve Somebody” – lyrics and music by Bob Dylan, 1979, Special Rider Music