

April 26, 2026
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Today is the twenty-second day of Easter, almost half-way through Easter's fifty days. Up to this point, we've heard stories about the Risen Christ appearing to various groups of disciples. Today marks a shift in the kinds of stories we hear, but we still need to keep on feasting.

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is called Good Shepherd Sunday, because the Gospel lesson is always from the tenth chapter of John, in which Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

The earliest known graphic representation of Jesus is as the Good Shepherd, a young man carrying a sheep on his shoulders. In a period before Christian imagery could be explicit or public, images of Jesus the Good Shepherd began to appear in Roman catacombs in the 3rd century. The popularity of this particular way of seeing Jesus soon overwhelmed the image's pagan ancestry and, from that day to this, images of Jesus the Good Shepherd continue to surround us – from stained glass to statues, from smart phone covers to refrigerator magnets.

This shouldn't come as a great surprise because sacred scripture is filled with shepherd images. But the Bible is very clear that the true shepherd is God (Ps 80:1), and that earthly rulers, even David, were established for the purpose of caring for God's people (Ps 78:70-71). It is also worth noting that not all human shepherds were, or are, good. Bad shepherds get a fair amount of ink, particularly in Ezekiel and Jeremiah (not to mention William Shakespeare and the *New York Times*).

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Today's Gospel passage comes immediately after the story of the man born blind that we heard back on the Fourth Sunday in Lent. A lot of the fuss in that story was Jesus (and John the Evangelist as well) drawing lines around who was a good Jew and who wasn't. The blind man's parents were afraid of coming up against the religious authorities – and the man himself was tossed out of the Synagogue community. Remember that John is writing his Gospel just as Christians began to be expelled from synagogues about 80 CE

At the end of that account, Jesus began to teach about spiritual blindness, which brings us to today's passage on shepherds, sheep, sheepfolds, gates, gatekeepers, and creepy strangers ... images that tumble over themselves.

I was raised in a tradition that tended to read this chapter of John as being all about who is "in" and who is "out" when it comes to God. It served as a handy proof-text to remind me that Jesus wouldn't love (or save) people who didn't look, act, think, believe, pray, love, or worship in the same way my home flock did.

There is a certain security in this "us and them" view of God, that there's only so much grace to go around, and if they get some, there's less for us, because they took it from us. As I say it out loud, it sounds a little silly, but that's how many of us still think about God and grace, as a zero-sum game. But, if we pay attention to the last verse of today's reading, we can see that this belief is just plain wrong. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Abundantly!

If we take Jesus at his word, this passage isn't about the scarcity of grace at all. It's not about a God who is stingy. It's not about the self-protective walls we construct and behind which we hide. The image of Jesus the Good Shepherd is, instead, about the bounteousness of grace, the generosity of God's provision and protection.

I am reminded of Henry William Baker's paraphrase of Psalm 23 [that we will sing as the Altar is prepared], whose fourth stanza reads.

Thou spreadst a table in my sight;
thy unction grace bestoweth,
and oh, what transport of delight
from thy pure chalice floweth!¹

Because Jesus is the gate, (and remember, gatekeeping is not our job!); because Jesus is the gate, we *will come in and go out and find pasture*, even in a world where thieves and bandits prowl. Jesus is the gate that opens to us the possibilities of pasture, nourishment, protection and rest, even in the valley of the shadow of death, where the shepherd's rod and staff are not only comfort, but protection.

The biggest risk comes from the sheep themselves – they (we) are apt to wander off, each to its own way. God promises to sustain us, but sometimes it's hard for us to believe in God's abundance. Instead, we are constantly scouting for greener pastures, imagining that we do not have enough by God's hand. "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love" writes Robert Robinson (1735-1790) in his hymn that calls God the "Fount of every blessing."

¹ *The King of Love my shepherd is*, Henry Williams Baker (1821-1877).

There are also dangers inside the sheepfold. Even in our place of shelter and rest, thieves may come in to steal and kill and destroy. Some slip over the walls and whisper to us that our Easter hope is misguided, that we really are following blindly, more like lemmings than sheep; and that death, after all, will have the final word. Other voices call to us from the outside, telling us that our shelter is a prison and that we'd do better to leave behind our false sense of security.

Then, sometimes, our own wandering hearts tempt us in the same way, giving us false hope that there's an easier path to life with God, without all the work, and all those other people, and the uncertainty of what transformation by the grace of God might look like.

Some of you may remember a famous Monty Python sketch about sheep.² A visitor to a farm is shocked to see sheep up in the trees – “nesting,” the farmer tells him. Some sheep are also trying, unsuccessfully, to fly, convinced by a sheep named Harold that they are, in fact, birds. The farmer explains that Harold is “that most dangerous of all animals: the clever sheep.”

Perhaps we are also trying to be too clever. Wouldn't it be easier if we could just take flight? If we didn't need to be patient followers, trusting beyond our immediate desires? If we didn't need to suffer the indignities of illness and death? If we weren't called to ease the sufferings of our neighbors? Wouldn't it be easier if our shepherd and savior didn't first have to suffer death upon the cross, before being raised and entering into heaven?

But Jesus the Good Shepherd doesn't call us to become something other than who we are; he calls us to grow into who God created us to be. The Good Shepherd doesn't round up the sheep with a whistle, or herd them with whips and prods and dogs. The Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name, and they follow him because they know his voice.

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One Christmas in the 1970's, my parents gave my siblings and me a cassette tape recorder/player. We were all very excited; it was cutting edge tech in those pre-digital days. It didn't take us long to figure out a way to torment our good-natured Golden Retriever, Gus. Taking turns, one of us would record, “come here, Gus, come here.” Then, while that kid was playing with Gus in one room, another would start the cassette player and shove it under the sofa in the family room.

For example, I would be sitting right there with Gus, and he would hear me calling him from the next room. Head spinning, tongue lolling, and ears flapping, he

² <https://www.ibras.dk/montypython/episode02.htm>

would dash back and forth trying to figure out which voice was which. Was it me or was it Memorex? Endless hours of fun! But you get my point: is it real or pretend?

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

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You and I are surrounded by countless loud voices, both human and not, competing for our attention. We need to be able to distinguish, to discern, between the false, lying voices and the voice of the Good Shepherd.

It might be easy to discern that the voice on the other end of the phone assuring us that “your call is very important to us” is not human, or that the offer to extend our car warranty is not in our best interest. But in this hyper-digital age of bots and trolls, and of algorithms that are often only elaborate echo chambers of our own narrow comfort zones, beliefs, and bigotries, the necessity of careful discernment is even greater.

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So, how do we do that discernment thing? Prayer is important. I don’t mean the kind of prayer where we search for churchy language to tell God how to fix what seems to be wrong, or what we don’t like. I mean the kind of prayer that is less about speaking, and more about listening.

It is a form of praying that takes practice...the kind of practice through which we learn to tell the difference between God’s voice speaking through others (or whispering within our own hearts) and the lying voices of people and systems that tell us we are not enough, or do not matter, or do not even exist.

There is an anonymous poem that reads

“Two natures beat within my breast
The one is foul, the one is blessed
The one I love, the one I hate.
The one I feed will dominate.”

This practice of prayer is about pausing to pay attention to the images evoked within us, the words that shimmer, the fleeting nudge, those momentary thoughts that occur to us. It’s about attuning the ears of our heart to discern God’s voice amid the many voices coming at us, and to feed that voice.³

This process of discernment can be boiled down to something our former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says over and over. “If it’s not about love, it’s not about

³ If you’re interested in a longer list of specific things to listen for, see

<https://www.ministrymatters.com/teach/entry/9627/my-sheep-hear-my-voice>

God.” That is the ultimate test of any word that anyone speaks to us...whether we find that word sweet or hard. If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.

My friends in Christ, one of the reasons we gather in places like this, week by week, is to remember what our shepherd sounds like, looks like, acts like. We gather to be formed in the practice of listening for the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

My prayer for you, especially in this Eastertide, is to pause and listen, then follow the voice that calls you by name, and speaks of the God who chooses you, loves you, walks with you, and will hold on to you through all of life, even through death, and into that new life when God will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

In the words of David, the Shepherd King from Psalm 95,

*You are our God,
And we are the people of your pasture,
And the sheep of your hand.
Oh, that today we would listen to your voice (Ps 95:7).*

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.