

**Sunday, April 30, 2023**  
**Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A)**

Acts 2.42-47; John 10.1-10

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/783956452951878>

*(Sermon begins at about 20:10)*

**“Sheepfolds”**

As we begin the fourth week of the seven-week season of Eastertide, we have a shift in focus. During the first three weeks, we focused on various post-resurrection encounters between the Risen Christ and his followers. Beginning this week, the focus shifts to some of Jesus’ teachings about what it means to live in intimacy with God. All teachings that occurred prior to his death and resurrection, but which, nonetheless, contain core truths that guide our lives as post-resurrection followers of Christ. This week, we start off with one of the most well-known and most beloved images of who Jesus is and who we are as his people: the story of the Good Shepherd.

Just to set the stage, the section of John’s Gospel we heard today documents a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. This is in response to Jesus healing the man born blind that we heard six weeks ago on the Fourth Sunday in Lent. After the healing, the Pharisees criticize, even condemn, Jesus because he performed the healing on the Sabbath. In response, Jesus calls out the Pharisees on their spiritual blindness—that they are getting hung up on their own self-interests and concerns, to the point that they do not see the truth of what is happening before their very eyes; that they are blind to who Jesus truly is.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees through images that would have been well-known in their own day. That of shepherding. He starts off by drawing a distinction between a good shepherd and one who “does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way,” that such a one is “a thief and a bandit.” While sounding like a quaint image involving animal husbandry, there is more to this image. Jesus is using a well-known and oft used image from Hebrew Scriptures, in which the promised Messiah is characterized as being a caring shepherd of the people. Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all use such images. And conversely, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, along with Zechariah, also contrast the anticipated divine shepherd with “worthless shepherds’ who neglect, exploit, and scatter the flock.”<sup>1</sup> Essentially, Jesus, in using the shepherd imagery, is likening the Pharisees to false shepherds who are abusing their authority and exploiting the people. A slap in the face that they undoubtedly would have picked up on. After all, the Pharisees were experts in the Hebrew Scriptures. They would have also picked up on another unspoken part of the biblical reference. That Jesus is the good shepherd. Which, as related back to the prophets and their messages, implies that Jesus is saying he is the Messiah. An implication that would have certainly made the Pharisees’ blood boil.

Now, to be clear, while we talk about this whole scene as referring to the Good Shepherd, the portion we heard today never actually uses that term. Although, it is strongly implied. No, Jesus does not actually use that term until the portion that follows today’s Gospel reading. Instead, in

today's Gospel, Jesus' analogy focuses less on the good shepherd—using the implication only as a way of criticizing the Pharisees and sending a not-so-subtle message about who he is—and focuses more on the image of the sheepfold and parts of its construction. Since not many of us likely have direct experience with the herding of sheep, we need to understand the concept of a sheepfold. Sheepfolds were enclosures surrounded by a wall, generally made of stone, and had a single wooden gate for entry and exit. They had one particular purpose. To provide a place to protect the sheep at night. During the day, the sheep would be out grazing, under the watchful eye of the flock's shepherd. But at night, the shepherds would move their flocks into a sheepfold to protect them from predators. A gatekeeper would be hired to guard the gate and make sure the sheep stayed safe. And to ensure that only the shepherds of those flocks were allowed in, preventing thieves and bandits from entering.

It was not uncommon for multiple flocks to use the same sheepfold. With the sheep of a number of flocks mingled together, there was the logistical issue of separating the flocks when it came time to let them out to graze. To accomplish that, the respective shepherds would use a variety of ways of calling and gathering their sheep—separating them from all the others that shared the sheepfold. Some shepherds named their sheep and taught them to respond to their names. Some played a particular note or even a tune on a pipe that his flock recognized. The sheep in each flock were trained to only respond to the call of their own shepherd. They were trained to only trust their own shepherd. In fact, as Jesus implies, the sheep are so well trained, they will run away from one who is not their own shepherd.

Putting all this shepherd and sheepfold imagery together, it becomes clearer that Jesus is sending a very particular message. Implying that he himself is the Messiah, God's anointed. Using the image of the good shepherd indicates that Jesus is not just talking about those he views as his flock, but about matters of faith and about God's relationship with his flock. A very common connection in Hebrew Scriptures. Combine that with the understanding of a good shepherd as one who cares for their sheep, providing them with nourishment and with safety, Jesus is sending a message about what that faith, particularly faith in him and faith in God, looks like. That faith is not based on a set of onerous laws to be followed, a set of propositions to be believed—as was the view of the Pharisees. Rather, faith is based on love and trust. Based on the love and care provided by the shepherd. And based on the love and trust of those being shepherded. According to Jesus, faith is not so much about what we believe as it is something to be experienced.

As I noted, in today's Gospel, Jesus does not specifically refer to himself as the good shepherd—although it is certainly implied. Rather, he says, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." He then goes on to say, "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." At first glance, Jesus likening himself to the gate as opposed to the shepherd may seem a bit odd. After all, it is the shepherd and not the gate who does the actual caring for the sheep. The sheep love and trust the shepherd, not the gate. But as we have established, shepherds are only responsible for the care of a subset of sheep—of a particular flock. The gate to the sheepfold, on the other hand, is a more expansive, more universal image. The gate is the point of access for all sheep, regardless of which flock they belong to. It is through the gate that the sheep have access to and receive protection and safety by night. It is through the gate that the sheep have access to and receive sustenance and nourishment by

day. If Jesus is the gate providing access to the sheepfold, then he is providing access to something greater, something more expansive, than himself. That he is the means to direct access to God, to relationship with God. Which is manifest in forms of protection and safety, sustenance and nourishment, that only God can provide.

This is further emphasized in Jesus' concluding statement in today's Gospel reading. In contrast to "the thief [who] comes only to steal and kill and destroy"—an image, albeit a bit harsh, for those only interested in exploiting the people for their own gain—Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." That his sole purpose is to provide for the safety, the well-being, the nurture, of all those in his care.

At the time that Jesus initially said these words in his stand-off with the Pharisees, no one could have anticipated the full extent of what Jesus meant by him coming "that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Certainly, a nice statement of intent. But what does that abundant life look like? Well, post-resurrection, we now know what Jesus really meant. That through his life, death, and resurrection, he provides entry to an abundant life beyond imagination. That we will share in his resurrection. A life characterized by the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of new and eternal life in him. You can't get much more abundant than that.

The early church sought to structure itself so as to live more fully into this promise of abundant life. As we see in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the early Christian Church was not only a center of education and worship, where members "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The early Church was also a community of mutual support, where "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Admittedly, the early Christian communities did not always (if ever) achieve this ideal. But it was, and still is, the model for what we think of as the hallmarks of Christian community. A place where Christ's promise of an abundant life for all his followers can at least begin to be realized. A place focused on studying and seeking to live according to the apostles teachings and fellowship—a model for discipleship outlined in the Gospels. A place devoted to the breaking of bread and the prayers—a model for worship, centered around the worship practice, the sacrament, Jesus himself instituted: the celebration of the Eucharist. A place for breaking bread and sharing meals together—a model for hospitality and fellowship. And a place for caring for those in need—a model for pastoral care and outreach.

All of these components of communal life contributing to the provision of abundant life for the community and its members. Something that our own parish seeks to model and to live into through our own worship, education, hospitality, pastoral care, and outreach. Which, I am pleased to say, we do a pretty good job at. In this, we are continually seeking to live into the model of our Lord, of being a shepherd for our own and all who seek to enter this place. As we seek, in our own small way, to be the gate to the sheepfold that is St. Gregory's, whereby those who come may find shelter and nurture. Where we seek to have life, and have it abundantly.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Abundant Life: SALT's Commentary for Easter 4," SALT, April 24, 2023. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/4/27/abundant-life-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-4>.