

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 04/30/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, April 30th

John 10:1-10

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Jesus the Good Shepherd

On what some denominations refer to as Good Shepherd Sunday, Jesus contrasts His leadership of God's people with that of Pharisees. He does this by using the illustration of a shepherd who looks after the welfare of the sheep versus the thieves and robbers who only aim to exploit the sheep. In our time, Jesus is still the door that we must pass through but there are many so-called shepherds in the church still leading people astray - more concerned with cultural preservation and institutional maintenance than the desire to see Christ manifest in the world.

John 10:1-10 Commentary

The text that is used in each lectionary year on this Sunday is always from John 10:1-30. In Year A, this year, the text is 10:1-10. Next year it will be 10:11-18 and two years from now it will be 10:22-30. We will not actually get to Jesus calling Himself the Good Shepherd until 10:11 and thus we will have to wait until next year! The context of this whole section is helpful to understand the assigned text for today. So is the immediate context of this entire section. The text fits into one large unit (9:1-10:21) following a typical pattern found in John:

Sign...Dialogue...Discourse. Jesus performs a sign (9:1-7) followed by the observers trying to determine what the sign means (9:8-39) followed by Jesus' interpretation of the sign (9:40-10:18). The sign in this case is the man born blind that featured in the lectionary six Sundays ago and must be seen as the context for this text.

Another nuance in the text is the two different agricultural settings in this text that would have been obvious to the original hearers. The setting in 10:1-6 is within a village with courtyards and narrow streets. The setting of 10:7-12 is open country where the shepherd would have led the sheep to graze. Finally, the audience for this text is established in 9:40: "*Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things...*"

So, Jesus here is contrasting His leadership with the leadership of the Pharisees and how they treated one of their sheep - the man born blind.

¹ "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. ² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the

voice of strangers.”⁶ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

The ESV correctly renders "door" (some translations use "gate") and *aulē* (court or courtyard) is rendered here as "sheepfold." In a small Jewish village of the time, most families would have owned a few sheep and kept them in their courtyards. Most did not have enough to justify a full-time shepherd so several households would have one shepherd that was probably related to one of the families. In the morning, the shepherd would come to the door of the courtyard of a house and the door keeper would recognize him and open the door. The shepherd would call out the sheep and they would recognize him and follow him. The shepherd would go onto the next house and do the same. Once the shepherd had collected all the sheep from the various households he was responsible for, he would ultimately lead them out away from the village to graze in open country. The sheep would not follow a stranger. The only person entering the courtyard by climbing in is clearly a thief or robber.¹

It is clear from John's narrative that the audience did not understand what Jesus was saying.

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

Jesus tries again. This time he uses an open country setting where shepherds might overnight the sheep in the open country during the summer months. The sheep would be led into small round enclosures built out of stone with thorns along the top to keep out wild animals. These enclosures were built with a permanent opening. The shepherd would lead the sheep into the enclosure and then use his own body as the door to keep the sheep in and predators out. Thus, any sheep entering by the shepherd would be saved from the predators and go in and out of the enclosure and find pasture.

The third of the seven "*I am*" statements is found in v.7. "*I am*" is a reference to the "*I AM*" of Exodus 3:14 - God's name revealed to Moses.

When Jesus states, "*All those who came before me are thieves and robbers*" (v. 8), it may be a reference to Old Testament passages that pronounced judgment on the shepherds of Israel for their failure to care for the people (examples include Jeremiah 23:1-8; Ezekiel 34), false messiahs, or perhaps how the Jews (*Ioudaioi* - Jewish leaders who grew wealthy at the expense of the people) who excommunicated the man born blind.

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus, in earshot of the Pharisees, now clearly contrasts the leadership of those who came before Him and His own. The sheep stealers had little thought for the sheep. The Jewish leaders had little thought for the people. Jesus' sheep are contented and well fed. The word rendered as "life" (*zōē*) is used in all four Gospels in the context of spiritual life, eternal life, passing from death to life, etc. Life in the fullest is only available in Christ.

Reflections

It is difficult to miss the high Christology with the "*I AM*" statement and Jesus describing Himself as the door through which all who enter will be saved. This passage is also about the bad shepherds - the thieves and robbers. If we were to apply this text to our modern era, who are the bad shepherds today? Nowhere in the text is there discussion of the Romans. The bad shepherds in the text are the leaders of Israel. Today, we must therefore look inside the church to find the bad shepherds. Who are the shepherds today who profess to protect God's people to

¹ C. G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 229.

simply use them to get rich? Just as in Jesus' time there are plenty of examples to point out and there are plenty of false gospels in play. As an example, there are those thieves and robbers that lure their sheep with the heretical health and prosperity gospel making only themselves rich in the process. There are those who compromise and dilute the Gospel to avoid upsetting their consumers who are there to have their sins affirmed rather than forgiven and easy-believism over repentance. There are also those shepherds who care more about the church as an institution than they do for people. At one extreme we find Christian nationalism where the church is wrapped in a flag and used to promote a culture – rather like the Deutsche Christen (German Christians) of Hitler's time. At the other extreme are those failing to speak a word of truth to the culture, being more concerned with maintaining declining memberships of their private privileged clubs. These clubs appear to focus more on member welfare inside the club than the welfare of the community surrounding the steepled club houses.

While there are many flocks there is only one Good Shepherd. It is this Shepherd who is the Door that we must pass through. When we seek to live lives aligned to the will of Christ rather than seek to satisfy our own selfish and egotistical desires, it is only then that we are blessed with abundant life – both on earth and in eternity.

Application

- In the imagery and symbolism of the sheep and the shepherd, a sheep only has one shepherd. There are many false shepherds and surrogate shepherds that exist in our time. How many competing shepherds are there in your life?
- How would you define abundant life (10:10)?
- Jesus said to Peter at the close of John's Gospel, "*Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep*" (21:15-17). In what ways are you called to be a shepherd in your life and ministry?

