

Following the Leader

[Acts 2:42-47](#)

[1 Peter 2:19-25](#)

[John 10:1-10](#)

[Psalm 23](#)

I believe it is safe to say that most of us have experienced a time when something has gone genuinely wrong...a diagnosis, a midnight phone call, a moment of genuine fear, when the bottom suddenly drops out. When that moment comes, and it comes for all of us at some point, we find ourselves reaching for someone or something. It may not be the most knowledgeable person, or the most powerful. It may not be a person at all. But what we reach for in those moments reveals an instinct that is the most honest thing about us. It reveals, more reliably than anything we might admit out loud, what actually governs our hearts. Jesus, in today's parable, is not asking a theoretical question about shepherds and sheep. He is asking the most practical question of our lives... when things get hard, whose voice are we actually following?

Every one of us is following something. Every day, sometimes every moment, we make a choice about what we allow to govern our hearts. And if we don't make that choice intentionally before the chaos comes, something will make it for us. Jesus calls those somethings thieves and bandits.

Jesus tells today's parable immediately after healing a man born blind. The religious leaders are still fuming because the people are beginning to follow this itinerant healer instead of them. That context matters. He is speaking directly to people who believe they hold spiritual authority, who have wealth, status, and institutional power, and he is telling them that the flock has noticed the difference between a true shepherd and someone using the flock for their own ends. Remember, Jesus always uses the healing of physical blindness to diagnose spiritual blindness. This parable is an invitation to examine who is really leading **us**, and whether we can tell the difference.

Jesus is also, deliberately using an ancient prophetic critique. He reaches back to Ezekiel, who condemned the religious leaders of his own day for feeding themselves while neglecting and scattering those they were meant to be shepherding. Jesus is saying: I am what a real shepherd looks like. Good shepherds do not coerce, exploit, or dominate. They call their sheep by name. And sheep recognize their true shepherd's voice and follow. Authority does not always rest with those who appear to be in charge. The people who had begun to follow Jesus recognized something in him more compelling than what they experienced from those Jesus was critiquing. And the disciples were compelled by it.

So, what does it look in practice like to actually follow the good shepherd when the world is pulling hard in other directions? The Acts community shows us. These were Jews living under Roman occupation who had imagined their messiah would come to overthrow their political enemies. Instead, the Romans killed him. These disciples had every reason to be paralyzed by fear or consumed by rage. But they weren't. Rather than allowing their hearts to be governed by Roman tyranny they reoriented themselves entirely around the transcendent reality of Christ, their true shepherd. The disciples were also Jewish people who had always worshiped in Jewish temples. After Christ's resurrection, they continued worshiping in the very temple governed by the leaders who had opposed Jesus' ministry, not because they were naive, but because they refused to let fear and division govern their hearts more than their shepherd did. The disciples' circumstances could have led them into dread or anger towards those who held power over them, but instead, they allowed themselves to follow the shepherd into transcendent love.

It also showed up in how they handled their money and possessions. This was a diverse community of wealthy civic leaders alongside recently healed outcasts and the poor. Rather than protecting their wealth, property, and social status, those who had extra gave it freely to support those who had nothing. Many fears and concerns vied to rule them, but they trusted and followed the leadership of the good shepherd. They practiced selfless communalism because their hearts trusted so completely in the provision of their

shepherd. They, like the Psalmist, did not fear being in want. Do we? The question Jesus' parable asks is who governs our hearts? The Acts community answered with their credit cards and their joy.

By the time Peter writes his letter, things have gotten harder. The disciples have been scattered, exiled from their original communities, living as minorities among hostile neighbors. They are suffering in heart, mind, and body. And Peter's answer is not a strategy for fixing their circumstances. It is a reminder of whose they are. Jesus is still their shepherd. His wounds are eternal marks of the depth of his love, not erased in the resurrection but carried, glorified, redemptive. We are invited into participation with Christ's life, Christ's way of showing love. Through Christ, our own suffering is likewise redeemed and transformed into testimony. We become healers even when we suffer, because like the Psalmist, we testify to the goodness of the one who walks through the valley of the shadow with us.

The twenty-third Psalm is honest about this in a way we sometimes prefer not to be. The good shepherd does not lead us around the valley of the shadow of death. He leads us through it. Being led through hard places does not make the shepherd bad, it means we have access to the presence and provision that makes it possible to travel without being destroyed. The dark valley we're walking through need not be more imposing than the presence who walks with us. But it can become so, if our attention drifts to the valley rather than remaining fixed on the shepherd.

And that is the daily danger. Our lives are full of forces competing for the governance of our hearts, security, wealth, politics, social causes, the relentless noise of a frightening moment in history. As Americans and Virginians, we may pride ourselves on the "don't tread on me" spirit, but all our hearts **are indeed** ruled by someone or something. And the things pulling at us are not always bad things. But when they govern us, when our anxiety about them chokes out everything else, they become, as Jesus says, thieves who come

only to steal, kill, and destroy. Abundant life, according to Jesus, is life connected to God. It is life that death cannot ultimately destroy. It is possible to be in the shadowy valley and still be in abundance, if we know whose voice we are following and the resources available to us through him. When we follow the good shepherd, trusting his leadership to direct us regarding all the things that pull at our hearts, we can be confident in finding abundance, even when traversing the shadowy dark places.

The community of the baptized in Acts knew the perilousness of their moment, and they chose, deliberately, to follow their shepherd by four specific practices that have sustained the church ever since. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. These were not private disciplines. They were communal, done together, with one another, in one another's company. Being taught together, enjoying each other, sharing the Eucharist, and praying together formed them into people who could recognize their shepherd's voice even when everything else tried to shout above it. If the pressure of outside forces is making it hard to hear our shepherd's voice, increasing one or all of these four practices is not a retreat from our difficulties. It is the way back to the shepherd's leadership in the middle of them.

Sometimes in life we will feel led by our good shepherd through green pastures and beside quiet waters. Other times, life will feel more like stumbling through darkness and death or standing in the presence of our enemies. But our Lord is not daunted by the threatening, imposing, impossible things we face. Christ is with us in them. If we listen for that voice and follow that leadership, we will experience the revival of our souls regardless of our circumstances. And we will also find ourselves becoming a blessing for those who have yet to know the shepherding love of Jesus.

May we be a people who always hear and recognize the voice of the good shepherd who guards us, revives our souls, and leads us into abundance.