

Easter 4 A Sermon
John 10:1-10
April 30, 2023

“Not a Sheep”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

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I’m not gonna lie, sometimes I’d just like to be a sheep. The early Islamic caliph Umar ibn al-Khattāb once said: “I wish I were a sheep or a lamb, fattened by my owners to their hearts’ desire. Then, when I became as fat as could be, people they liked would visit them, and they would turn part of me into roast.” Now, that’s not exactly what I have in mind, but there are days when I’d like to muddle mindlessly along munching grass and puttering about in the sunshine without a care in the world. I’d like to

wander around without worrying about getting lost, knowing that even if I did, someone else would fuss over me and, with a gentle nudge of their staff, guide me back to the flock. I'd like to live free from anxiety while someone else keeps me fed, leads me to greener pastures and beside cool streams of water. I'd simply frolic and play with the other sheep without fretting while someone else keeps me safe from all harm, leads me to the security of the sheepfold at night, and lies down to sleep in front of the gate so that not even the boogey man would frighten me in the dark.

There are days when I'd like to be able to turn to my benevolent shepherd and know that they have all my best interests at heart, that they'll make sure I always have enough, that they'll do anything in their power to keep me safe—to protect me from harm. Doesn't that sound nice?

But, we know better. We are not sheep. We know that we have to look out for ourselves. We know that our leaders don't always have our best interests at heart, or make sure that we have enough, or keep us safe. We don't live in one of those bucolic shepherding scenes of classical art. We live in the real world and sometimes it's scary.

The author of John's gospel lived in that real world too. And so did their audience. Most of the folks first hearing these words were laborers or farmers, but some were also business people or religious leaders. They worked hard, but resources could be scarce and their leaders were often corrupt. They could have put names and faces to the thieves, bandits, and scary strangers in this metaphor. The author also wanted them to be able to put a name and a face to the Good Shepherd—a protector and leader—and that name was Jesus.

It's not surprising that the author described Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It's an image with its roots in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible where the prophets looked forward to a time when a chosen one would once again feed the people and be their shepherd. In claiming this image for Jesus, John's author also claimed the expectation that went with it—the expectation that this man would protect, provide, and lead.

However, not all ancient associations with shepherds were positive. Writing about 300 years before Jesus was born, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that a king is a “benefactor of his people, inasmuch as he devotes his whole talents to their welfare, and tends them as a shepherd does his sheep.”¹ High-ranking political figures could serve as metaphorical shepherds for their people, but actual shepherds were not so highly regarded. Aristotle once described them as “the laziest ... who lead an idle life, and get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks wandering from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivating a sort of living farm.”² The appraisal of shepherds among the Hebrew people of Jesus’ time was not much more favorable and yet Jesus boldly reclaims the image, holding up the selfless shepherd as the ultimate example of love, protection, care, and guidance.

While we are not sheep, human beings do long for this kind of shepherd—this kind of leader. We long for leaders who will protect and provide and lead us with our best interests at heart while keeping us from harm and ensuring that none go without. We long for leaders who can fix companies, and churches, and communities, and countries. We long for leaders who can fix the environment, and fix medical care, and fix the economy. We long for bipartisan leaders who will bridge the aisle and broker prosperity and negotiate peace. We long for these kinds of leaders—these kinds of shepherds.

But, lest we forget, the same Jesus of John’s gospel goes on to commission his followers to carry on his work, to feed the sheep, to be *shepherds* for one another and for the world. Our charge as Jesus’ followers today is no different. *We are not* called to wait for a good shepherd to come to power and fix all of the world’s problems. *We are* called to actively work to fix them ourselves, to watch over those who are vulnerable, to get to know our neighbors and their needs, to share our resources, even to give of ourselves for the sake of others. We are called to be shepherds and not

¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*

² Aristotle, *Politics*

sheep—to be the hands and feet, hearts and minds, eyes, ears, and mouths of the good shepherd in and for the world.

Church people, though, have a tendency to be less like Jesus' metaphor of the Good Shepherd and more like his metaphor of the gate. In the last part of our text, Jesus says that he is the gate, but rather than be good shepherds, many of Jesus' followers prefer to take up the role of gate-keeping. We like to decide who gets to the pastures within, the benefits of community, and acceptance, and grace, and who remains squarely outside. The role of gate-keeping was never meant to be ours. We are called to feed the sheep and to be shepherds for one another and for our world.

In the closing line of our text from John's gospel, Jesus states, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." As the church in the 21st century, our purpose is the same—to live and love and serve for the abundant life of the world while welcoming all the sheep into the fold of community, acceptance, and grace.

As we think about who's welcome in this place, in the building of New England Congregational Church, let's take our job as shepherds seriously. We're meant to be at work out there addressing the needs of our community, but we're also meant to be welcoming others in here. What we've got, is so worth sharing. Amen.