

**“Will the Real Shepherd Please Stand Up?” Fourth Sunday After Easter
April 30, 2023 John 10:1-10 Rev. Michele Ward
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore MD**

GOSPEL READING John 10:1-10 (NRSVUE) Rev. Michele Ward

The reading today comes from the Gospel of John.
Listen now for a Word from God.

“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.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

This week I participated in the Washington D.C. Ecumenical Advocacy Days, which brings together almost 1,000 Christians from around the United States and its territories to advocate for political change. I joined 10 other Marylanders to lobby on behalf of SNAP benefits and the Senate’s Farm Bill.¹

Here’s the language of the ask we were given: “The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a vital lifeline for over 42 million Americans including people with low incomes, individuals with disabilities, veterans, and older Americans. As of 2020, over

¹ The Farm Bill, <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/farm-bill>

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180,000 Baltimore City residents, or 30% of the city’s population, participate in SNAP.² As people of faith, we urge Congress to protect the program from cuts and harmful policy changes like those proposed in the Limit, Save, and Grow Act of 2023. Cutting funding, imposing harsh work requirements, and limiting eligibility for certain groups will result in many losing access to this vital program and further exacerbate food insecurity and hunger in America.”³

SNAP is one such protective mechanism built into the sheepgate of our government. The new SNAP restrictions limit people such as veterans, lgbtq people, and low income college students from receiving adequate SNAP benefits. These restrictions bring them closer to the edge of homelessness and the hunger cliff in a time when food and housing prices are rocketing. The choice to pay for groceries or rent is a cruel and needless one.

Each policy is a choice we make. Each threat to the safety net is a choice we make.

The last few weeks Jesus has shown up in all sorts of unexpected places after the resurrection: appearing through walls, sharing meals, and showing up in disguise. But today, the lectionary takes a hard turn from the road to Emmaus to the enigmatic Gospel of John where Jesus describes who he is and what his ministry means. John 10 opens with the phrase, “Very truly, I tell you.”

John uses this phrase to alert readers that Jesus is about to share something crucial. He begins to describe someone who enters the sheepfold without using the gate as “a thief or a bandit.” The person who enters the sheepfold using the gate is “the shepherd of the sheep.” The sheep knows his name and follows him out. A stranger may try to lead them, but the sheep will not obey someone they do not know.

² “SNAP Benefits Recipients in Baltimore City, MD,” <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CBR24510MDA647NCEN>

³ “From Swords into Plowshares:” EAD 2023 Asks, Ecumenical Advocacy Days.

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I want to focus on other pieces of the text this morning, but I would be remiss if I didn't pause to mention an important interpretative note here regarding anti-Semitism and White supremacy. Interpreters who understand the 'strange voices' and the 'thieves and bandits' as Jewish religious leaders, pave the way for discrimination, and in the past, mass murder. Making supersessionist claims, or claims rooted in the belief that Christianity supersedes Judaism, laid religious groundwork for genocide and pogroms.

It can be hard to wade through a story so muddled by bad interpretation, but you know me by now. And on our way to the good news this morning, we're going to take a hike through Nerd Mountain. From a womanist's interpretation of a Greek word, to Aristotle, to Ezekiel's shepherds, and back to John.

Womanist scholar Dr. Angela Parker offers us a compelling retranslation of one word, one word that unlocks the sheeppate in a new way for us this morning.

In verse six, John pauses and explains to the audience that Jesus is using a "figure of speech," and that no one understood his teaching.

The Greek word here is *paroimia*, which though translated for us as "figure of speech" also means "lofty idea" or "veiled saying."⁴ The Gospel of John is full of oblique references and strange stories. Some scholars equate John's *paroimia* to the *paraboles*, or "comparisons,"⁵ of the other three Gospels. But – just because Jesus talks about lost sheep in Matthew 18 and Luke 13, does not mean John is delivering the same message.

In fact, John's Gospel is much more like the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, reminding us of the books of Proverbs and

⁴ Rev. Dr. Angela Parker, "Commentary on John 10:1-10, April 30, 2023, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-6>

⁵ A parable is a moral story that illustrates ethical principles or spiritual attitudes.

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Ecclesiastes. In the apocryphal Book of Sirach, the words for parables and proverbs are different. We overlook this detail unless we trace back to the source literature.⁶

Jesus is not making any 1:1 morality claims in this piece of wisdom. He is making a direct reference using a common political idea in the era in which he lived. He is not moralizing. He is showing us what good leadership is.

400 years before John wrote his gospel, Aristotle used the same imagery to describe a good political leader: a good king. He writes, a ruler 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.”⁷ Now... I do want to note that Aristotle calls *actual* shepherds in *Politics*, “the laziest ... who lead an idle life ... wandering from place to place.”⁸

The idea that Greco-Roman political leaders could be metaphorical shepherds while real shepherds were described in deeply negative ways makes the language that Jesus uses to describe himself even more revolutionary.

New Testament scholar Warren Carter makes the argument that the shepherd is an image for political leadership in the Gospel of John and in the Book of Ezekiel.⁹

⁶ “They seek out the wisdom of all the ancients and are concerned with prophecies; they preserve the sayings of the famous and penetrate the subtleties of parables; they seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs and are at home with the obscurities of parables.” Sirach 39:1-3

⁷ Rev. Dr. Angela Parker, “Commentary on John 10:1-10, April 30, 2023, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-6>

⁸ Rev. Dr. Angela Parker, “Commentary on John 10:1-10, April 30, 2023, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-6>

⁹ Rev. Dr. Angela Parker, “Commentary on John 10:1-10, April 30, 2023, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-6>

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Two hundred years before Aristotle wrote, the authors of Ezekiel wrote the entire 34th chapter in the first person narrative with Ezekiel speaking on behalf of God – with language for shepherding leadership. Ezekiel spells out the entirety of what a good shepherd, or a good political leader looks like.

He says that God will be the one and only leader who looks out for people, and no one else and no other gods will do that for them. One verse in particular stands out - verse 16 - “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

For 600 years, the shepherd imagery reigns when it comes to good and just rulers. It is in the water, recognizable.

Jesus says that the sheep will know the shepherd’s voice, and know that they are safe. He stands as the gate, protecting, saving, guarding what the shepherd loves.

During Ecumenical Advocacy Days this week, we met with our representatives to advocate for them to be good shepherds. We met with Senator Ben Cardin’s team, and I was struck by something.

In this meeting, the good shepherd was not a Senate staffer. It was the woman who went off script and talked about being a SNAP benefits recipient. She said her written piece, and took a pause. With 60 seconds remaining in our meeting, she told a personal story about the power of SNAP to save the lives of her family members. When she lost her job during the pandemic and could not afford to purchase medically necessary food, SNAP kept her pantry and fridge full. If we had been in person instead of on Zoom, believe me when I say you could have heard a pin drop, so holy was the silence.

Good shepherds call out to their people with love and care. They bind up their wounds, they seek the lost ones, they take necessary risks for the sheep in their care. But they cannot act alone in a field, running pell mell after loose sheep seeking a snack in another

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meadow, or fighting off a wolf pack with just a long stick in their hand. A good shepherd must also preserve the sheepgate. Without a solid gate for the sheepfold, all of the work the shepherd has done to herd the sheep inside of it is useless. A good shepherd requires a good sheepgate.

She was a good shepherd. She was demanding the preservation of a sheepgate. Without SNAP, she and those she loves are vulnerable to the wolves of the world – corporate greed, bloating prices, and food apartheid. A good shepherd, even the best shepherds can only do so much with their two hands. A good Senate can only do so much with goodwill. The sheepgates of our communities must be priorities.

In this Easter season, Jesus reminds us of what it takes to protect and care for life. He reminds us of how fragile it is. How much it takes to love and protect it.

Seek the lost.

Bring back the strays.

Bind up the injured.

Strengthen the weak.

Stand up as the sheepgate.

Amen.