



Following the Voice that Leads to Life
April 26, 2026
4th Sunday of Easter
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Ezekiel 34:7-1; John 10:1-10

There is something tender and a bit unsettling about the way scripture consistently dares to call us sheep. Not eagles. Not lions. Not lone rangers roaming the hills with rugged independence. Sheep. Soft creatures with wool that tangles easily in briars. Creatures who do not see far ahead. Creatures who depend on the sound of a voice they trust.

In the hills of the ancient world, sheep did not survive on instinct alone. They survived on relationship. A shepherd didn't simply drive them from behind; a shepherd walked ahead, calling them by name, singing to them in the dusk, guiding them toward water and away from ravines.

When we happen upon Ezekiel in our reading for today, the prophet is not whispering words of

comfort. He's sounding an alarm. "Woe to the shepherds," God says through Ezekiel, "who feed themselves instead of the flock." Here we envision leaders who clothe themselves in the wool while neglecting the sheep—growing fat on what was meant to sustain the flock and leaving the vulnerable to become easy prey for wolves.

God's grief in Ezekiel is the grief of a shepherd who surveys the pasture at dawn and finds the gate has been left open. The sheep have scattered; the lambs are lost. "I am against the shepherds, and I will hold them accountable...I myself will search for my sheep," God promises. "I will rescue them. I will feed them with good pasture...I myself will be their shepherd...I will make them lie down." There is a fierce tenderness in these words.

Centuries later, in the Gospel of John, Jesus steps into this ancient promise and offers an image that would have certainly resonated with his hearers. "I am the gate," he says. "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 through me will be saved...They will come in and go out and find pasture." Here we see how Jesus will serve as the gate—as a threshold between danger and abundance.

To understand this image, it may help if we picture the sheepfold of Jesus' day—a circular enclosure of stone, open to the sky, with a single narrow opening. At night, the shepherd would lie down across that opening. The shepherd became the gate. Nothing entered without passing over the shepherd's body. The predators were kept out, and the sheep were kept safe. And when morning came, the gate opened to green pasture. This is the kind of life Jesus promises—not confinement, but safety that leads to flourishing. "I came," he says, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

For followers of Jesus, though, abundant life is not a life padded with luxury. It's not a life measured in square footage or bank accounts. It's not a life secured by power or prestige. Abundant life is the life that unfolds when sheep trust the voice of a good shepherd, so that together they can make their way toward green pastures.

There is no doubt we live in a time when many voices shout across the hillsides. Staying with this image for a moment—the sheep, the shepherd, the many voices echoing across the fields—it might be worthwhile to consider Jesus' description as it relates to the church—as it relates to us—learning to recognize the shepherd's voice.

There are those who insist that the church is under attack in this country—that wolves circle constantly—that danger presses in from every direction. Well, that depends on how you look at it. From where I stand, the greatest danger to the church today is not from outside its gates. The greatest danger to the church today is the church itself—or at least, many who claim to BE the church. Because not every voice calling from the hillside belongs to the shepherd, who tends the

flock with care. Some voices promise abundance but deliver emptiness. Some voices promote a gospel that sounds suspiciously like a sales pitch.

The prosperity gospel, for example—so polished and certain—has whispered into the ears of countless believers that faith is a transaction. Blessings are measured in dollars and God's favor shows up in luxury cars and private jets. But the shepherd we meet in the Gospel of John does not drive a caravan of wealth. He walks dusty roads. He kneels beside wounded sheep. He risks his own life to protect the vulnerable. The prosperity gospel turns the pasture into a marketplace. It replaces green grass with glittering promises. And the sheep become famished while convinced they are full. It's a dangerous distortion of the way of Jesus.

And then there is another danger—one that grows when faith becomes entangled with power. When the church bows not to Christ but to political leaders, when pulpits echo the language of fear rather than the language of grace, when allegiance to wealth and influence overshadows allegiance to love—then the flock begins to scatter. We are living in a moment when certain corners of the church have wrapped themselves tightly around political movements, pledging loyalty to power, wealth, and national identity as if these were sacred things.

But Jesus never asked for loyalty to empires. He never preached devotion to billionaires. He never promised salvation through political dominance. He spoke instead of gates and pastures, of shepherds and sheep, of abundant life rooted in compassion, justice, and mercy. There are voices within the wider church who continue to remind us of this truth. Pope Francis once called on the world's priests to bring the healing power of God's grace to everyone in need, to stay close to the marginalized, and to be "shepherds living with the smell of the sheep." His metaphor carries a world of meaning. To know one's flock, one must share in their lives and embody the humility and compassion of Christ. And within our own tradition, the witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA) continues to call us toward tending the vulnerable, seeking the lost, and walking patiently beside the weary. Not spiritual arrogance or domination. But faithful presence in a wounded world.

Here's a truth we must face, even if it stings: The church does not falter because the world rejects it. The church falters when it forgets who its shepherd is and trades the narrow gate of Christ for the wide roads of power and comfort. The church falters when it confuses abundance with excess.

And yet, the promise of Ezekiel still speaks to us. "I myself will search for my sheep," God says. Even when leaders fail and faith feels fragile, Jesus, the Christ, stands at the gate, and invites us into a different way of living. The way of Jesus is not driven by fear. It is a shepherd-driven faith that listens carefully for the tone of the true voice and, over time, learns to recognize the difference between a shepherd's call and a stranger's clamor.

Perhaps the question before us this morning is not whether the church is under attack but whether the church is listening to the right voice. Are we following the shepherd—or dangerously wandering after strangers? Are we guarding the gate—or leaving it open to thieves who rob and steal? The hillsides of our time are noisy. Voices are coming at us from every direction. But somewhere—steady and clear—the shepherd still calls us toward green pastures of grace and goodness, overflowing waters of mercy, and life abundant.

If we are sheep—and scripture insists that we are—then our survival depends on learning the sound of the Good Shepherd’s voice. Not every voice that quotes scripture belongs to the shepherd. Not every leader who waves a Bible stands at the gate of life. Some voices climb over the walls. Some voices sneak in through shadows. Some voices promise safety while quietly leading sheep toward a cliff. But the true shepherd knows our scent, our nature, our heart—and he calls us by name. And when we listen, truly listen, we hear the voice of Christ. And you know what it sounds like? It sounds a lot like love. Amen.

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