

JOHN 10:1–10. (EHV)

“Amen, Amen, I tell you: Anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the door, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. The doorkeeper opens the door for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own sheep, he walks ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this illustration in speaking to the people, but they did not understand what he was telling them. So Jesus said again, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: I am the door for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. Whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

“The new sheep runs around and around banging its head against the rough stone walls of the sheepfold emitting a stream of pitiful, heartbreaking cries.” This description, which I’ll elaborate on later in the sermon, describes a sheep without a shepherd. It’s something we don’t experience with Jesus as our Good Shepherd, which is why this Sunday and Psalm 23 and this chapter from John’s Gospel are so precious to us.

But Jesus doesn’t just talk directly about himself as the Good Shepherd here. He teaches us about himself by teaching us about his flock. His flock has good under-shepherds. His flock listens to his voice. His flock receives abundant blessings.

1.

First, Jesus emphasizes that his flock has good under-shepherds. In order to understand what he says, we have to do our best to put ourselves in the sheep-tending world of his day. Imagine a house with an outdoor walled enclosure attached to the back of the house where the family’s sheep are kept at night. One of the walls is the back side of the house, and the other walls are six or six feet high with large jagged thorns or pieces of broken glass worked into the plaster along the top edge. This is meant to have the same effect as a wire fence with barbed wire at the top; it is meant to prevent thieves and robbers from climbing in and making off with the sheep.

In the morning the shepherd—probably a young man from the extended family—comes calling at the door, indicating he is ready to tend the flock for the day. I’m not sure what the exact layout of such a house would be in relation to the sheep pen in back, but if a family had a large enough flock warranting such a backyard sheep pen, we can imagine that there would be a special door in the house to a special passage leading straight to and from the sheep pen. Obviously, the family would not have the sheep go in and out through their living room or kitchen. And a servant or family member living in that house would be the doorkeeper, the one responsible for opening the door when the shepherd came calling in the morning.

Once the doorkeeper opened the door for the shepherd, the shepherd could use the greatest tool at his disposal—his voice. In fact, by that time, the sheep would probably be getting

restless from not having eaten for perhaps fourteen hours or more and from being cooped up all night, and they would probably already be on the alert when the doorkeeper opened the door for the shepherd. But they won't just rush out as soon as they hear the door open. The shepherd needs to call them with his voice.

“Haa, haa, ta‘o, ta‘o!”

This is one of the common calls used by shepherds in that part of the world still today. But the important thing is not pronouncing the words a certain way. I probably butchered the pronunciation, but it wouldn't matter if I had gotten it exactly right, because there is not a flock on earth that recognizes the tone and timbre of my voice, and *that* is the important thing. Once the sheep hear the distinctive voice of their particular shepherd with his familiar call, they will approach the entrance of the door, eager to follow their shepherd out to new pasture, shady trees, and fresh air.

Now we can listen to Jesus and understand him better: “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the door, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. The doorkeeper opens the door for him, and the sheep listen to his voice.”

There are a couple of hints here that Jesus is not yet talking about himself, at least, not directly. First, even though many English translations say that the one who enters by the door or through the gate is *the* shepherd of the sheep, the word “the” isn't there in the original Greek. Jesus does of course say later in this chapter that he is the ultimate shepherd, the good, the best shepherd. But here the verse could also be translated, “The one who enters by the door is *a* shepherd of the sheep.” Secondly, Jesus later tells his audience explicitly where he fits in this first part of his illustration: “I am the door for the sheep.”

So when he says, “The one who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep,” he's talking about who the true under-shepherds are and who his true sheep are. Those who are legitimate and honest and true under-shepherds are those who access the flock and tend the flock through the door—and the door is Jesus. They don't try to access the sheep by some other entry point; that is to sneak in over the wall and to steal the sheep, and will ultimately result in the sheep's death and destruction, nothing else.

In applying Jesus's words, we should also realize that the thief or the robber might not know he's a thief or a robber. He might have completely genuine intentions and think that what he's offering the sheep is what's best for the sheep. But Jesus says, if he doesn't access the sheep through the door, that is, through himself, if he addresses the sheep with his own voice and his own words rather than Jesus's, if he isn't preaching the true gospel but his own perverted version of it or a different message entirely, he is a thief and a robber and is leading the sheep to their slaughter whether he realizes it or not.

After telling us that the sheep listen to the voice of the shepherd who accesses them through the door, he continues: “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own sheep, he walks ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

A shepherd will often develop a special attachment to a few sheep in the flock, those that almost always stick close to him. They essentially become his pets. A shepherd will give names

to those few sheep, names that often reflect the sheep's appearance or character, names like Split Ear, Short Tail, Bright Eye, Lazy, or Black Spot. But notice what Jesus says about true under-shepherds here: Every sheep must be his favorite, because he calls all of his sheep out by name. Since the Good Shepherd does not show favoritism, he does not either; they're all his favorites. He is interested in all of them.

Now we are obviously seeing why Jesus will say that he is the Good Shepherd later. Even the best under-shepherd does not fit this description perfectly. We are seeing something that is a trend in this chapter. Jesus is both stating a gospel fact and issuing an encouragement, and a rebuke if the circumstances warrant a rebuke. The gospel fact is that, if the under-shepherd is accessing and addressing the sheep through the door, if he is preaching the gospel to them and showing them Jesus as their only Savior and their all-sufficient Savior, and doing so because he himself believes in Jesus as such, then in God's eyes he is this kind of shepherd, even if in the earthly reality he still struggles to remember the names of the souls in his care. The encouragement to pastors is that they live up to this standard, and the pastor should also read these words as a rebuke if he thinks that the names and individual characters of the souls in his care aren't that important, or if he blatantly favors one of his parishioners over the other in his ministry to them. But since Jesus does call himself the Good Shepherd later, the gospel comfort for the flock is that wherever our under-shepherd might fail, Jesus does not. Whether or not your pastor knows your name and calls you by name, Jesus does. Whether or not your pastor takes an interest in your life, Jesus does. Whether or not your pastor shows favoritism, Jesus does not.

2.

But as the Good Shepherd, Jesus also wants to issue some statements to his sheep that serve as both gospel facts and as encouragements and perhaps also as rebukes. He teaches us that his flock listens to his voice: "When [the honest shepherd] has brought out all his own sheep, he walks ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers." Remember that Jesus is assuming that the shepherd leading these sheep is an honest and godly shepherd, one who has accessed and addressed the sheep through the door, that is, through him. The sheep, the Good Shepherd's flock, follow such a shepherd because they know his voice. They recognize in his voice the voice of Jesus.

I read a book by a minister who once asked a student with experience in shepherding how things go when a new sheep is introduced to the flock. What if a sheep from another flock is purchased and added to a new flock? How does that new sheep react when the shepherd comes calling at the door in the morning? The student told him, "It has a temporary nervous breakdown." He can see and sense that the other sheep he is with know this shepherd, but to him, the voice is wrong. So he has a breakdown; he runs around and around banging his head against the rough stone walls of the sheepfold emitting a stream of pitiful, heartbreaking cries. He needs a few days of therapy to retrain his ear to recognize the voice of the new shepherd.

Did you hear what Jesus said about you, Christians? "They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers." Is that true? There are any number of so-called Christian books, radio programs, songs, and other resources out there, and they come from a number of different denominations and have a number of different

emphases and things to say. In fact, the reason that different denominations exist is because people calling themselves Christian don't all teach the same thing.

But of course Jesus isn't divided; he teaches the same thing, one true body of doctrine, throughout his Word. So are we equally comfortable reading any of those books, listening to any of those songs or programs, making use of any of those resources? Are our ears atune to the voice of a stranger? Does false doctrine bother us as much as that new sheep banging his head against the rough stone wall? It should. "They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers." This is not to say that everything from other denominations is automatically bad, or that everything from your own denomination is automatically good. It is to say: True and false doctrine, honest and dishonest voices, are a big deal to your Savior, so they should be a big deal to you too—especially because they're a big deal to him because he cares about you.

But there's a gospel fact here too, isn't there? Jesus states it as a fact that his sheep never follow the voice of a stranger. If our faith is anchored in Christ for our salvation, then his blood covers over our sins and shortcomings, his memory erases the times we suddenly discovered ourselves in the midst of the wrong flock and had to be rescued. There are no so-called black sheep in his flock; he views us all as the best, most faithful sheep, for his own saving name's sake.

3.

The reason the Good Shepherd describes us believers that way, the reason he urges us so strongly to listen only to those shepherds who access and address them through the door, through him, and who lead them with his voice is because he wants us to enjoy the abundant blessings that every sheep in his flock receives and enjoys.

"Amen, Amen, I tell you: I am the door for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. Whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

The Good Shepherd's flock enjoys his protection and safety. False teachers cannot deceive and harm us. The devil and his wolves cannot destroy us. The wall of our sheep pen is not made out of bricks or stone, but is formed by God's mighty angels and his own all-powerful hand.

The Good Shepherd's flock enjoys his freedom. "They will come in and go out," Jesus says. Did you notice before that Jesus described his under-shepherds as going on *before* the flock instead of driving them from *behind*? This is actually one of the chief ways you can distinguish Jesus's voice and the voice of one of his honest under-shepherds from the voice of a stranger. Jesus simply teaches you his Word and trusts in his doctrine's intrinsic beauty and power to draw you after it willingly. Those not armed with his Word rely predominantly on coercion, peer pressure, threats, manipulation of the emotions, and force. One of the things that absolutely drives me crazy is when I read an unsolicited email that otherwise sounds a lot like my Savior's voice, but then concludes with something like: "You now have one of two options: You can either delete this email, or if you truly love Jesus, you can forward it to five friends." No matter how much I loved the rest of it, I always delete such emails immediately. My Savior's voice

leads in front of me and gently draws me after him. But those kinds of emails are driving me from behind. The same goes for the 1-800-FOR-TRUTH billboards that you see along the interstate. Sometimes the message is good: "Jesus died for the sins of the world." Other times the message is something like: "Real Christians obey Jesus' teachings." That's true, but as a stand-alone message it drives from behind, instead of gently leading from in front.

The Good Shepherd's flock enjoys his pasture. What a blessing it is to continue to feed on God's word and promises! What a joy it is to feed together on his Son's body and blood given and shed for our salvation! What a joy to know he doesn't only forgive our sins at church, but does so richly and daily; he loves us every day the same! What a joy to know that he knows our needs and well provides us!

And that brings us to the last and greatest blessing: The Good Shepherd's flock enjoys his life. "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." We already talked about how we have this life of spiritual, and in many ways physical, abundance right now. But have you ever seen someone close to you waste away in death? Have you ever known someone whose heart continued to beat and whose lungs continued to heave long after they could communicate with you or even look at you, and you wondered, "What possible purpose could God have in allowing one of his own to waste away like this"? Here's one answer Jesus gives. We know what it's like to have death. We see it all around us if we look closely enough. But Jesus says he came that we may have life, and not just have life like we have death, but have life abundantly. So the more you are confronted with death in all of its ugliness, the more that person you love wastes away, just think: Jesus is showing you by contrast just what awaits us in heaven. As you look at someone wasting away, you can think: Jesus is going to give us the opposite of this, but not just the corresponding opposite. Death is destructive in one direction, but the life our Good Shepherd has in store for us is going to be so far in the opposite direction in its abundance that it will make even the absolutely worst, most cruel, most prolonged death look like a game by comparison.

What a blessing it is to be a member of the Good Shepherd's flock! He gives us under-shepherds who access and address us through him and who speak to us with his voice. He teaches us to listen to and follow his voice. And thereby he bestows on us abundant and eternal blessings. "Who so happy as I am, Even now the Shepherd's lamb! And when my short life is ended, by his angel hosts attended, he shall fold me to his breast, there within his arms to rest." Amen.