

4.26.2026 Easter 4

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 2:42-47, 36-41; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-11

“Follow his voice”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The 4th Sunday of Easter is sometimes called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Today we remember and give thanks to Jesus Christ, for he is the Good Shepherd who leads and protects all who call upon him.

In today’s gospel, Jesus says two things: “*I am the gate for the sheep*” and “*I am the good shepherd.*” These two “I am” statements by Jesus tell us, first, that only through “Jesus the gate” do we have access to God’s kingdom, and second, he always walks with and alongside of us. He is the shepherd who loves and cares for us.

By calling himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus is echoing the prophet Ezekiel in whom God declares, “*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep*” (Ezek. 34:15). Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to become the shepherd for all people.

The image of the shepherd was often used in antiquity to describe kings and rulers as shepherds of their people. In Ezekiel, as God expresses divine anger and frustration with the kings and rulers of Israel who had not cared for their people, God is suggesting that shepherds are to be just and compassionate leaders. In Ezekiel, God says,

Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for wild beasts. (Ezek. 34:2b-5)

God spoke with anger about the kings and leaders of ancient Israel because they enjoyed the trappings power and wealth, but had not cared for or united their people, allowing them to be scattered. Again, God says, “*I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them into their own land...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I will make them lie down*” (Ezek. 34:13, 15).

Ezekiel’s words echo Psalm 23 in which God is described as a shepherd who gives rest, water, nourishment, strength, goodness and mercy, by walking with us through life’s darkest valleys. God prepares tables of fellowship for us in times of trouble, even before our enemies, and God pursues us all our lives with goodness and mercy. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s

promise to be the Good Shepherd to all who call upon him.

Though the ancient image of the Good Shepherd is common in the Bible, it is a difficult image for modern people to understand. We have often sentimentalized the Good Shepherd with cute sheep and a sandy-haired muscular big-brother-like Jesus. In doing so, we fail to grasp God's ideal of the Good Shepherd as the vocation of leaders and governments who have been entrusted with the care of their people. In God's vision, shepherds are not to use their power and authority to profit for themselves; and they are not to abuse and neglect their people. Rather, they are given their power as a sacred trust precisely to help and lift the weakest and most vulnerable so that all people might know an abundance, peace, and safety that has its source in God.

In describing himself as "the gate" and "the Good Shepherd," Jesus is saying that we must pass through him if we are to know the abundant life of God's kingdom. First, this idea of Jesus as both "gate and Good Shepherd" echoes Jesus' other words in John, "*I am and way, and the truth, and the life; no one come to the Father but by me*" (Jn. 14:6). Jesus is both the gate and the way, we might say the "gateway" to the Father – for in him is God's promise of abundant life.

Second, Jesus is saying that the Good Shepherd protects his flock at all costs, even to laying down his life. He is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life on the cross so that he might live raised in the power of the resurrection to lead people from all nations into the Father's kingdom. Jesus is, as 1 Peter writes, "*the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*"

Just as Ezekiel castigated rulers for neglecting and even abusing their own people, Jesus also reveals the existence of false shepherds: "*All who came before me are thieves and bandits...the thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy.*" Again, Jesus' words are difficult for us as modern people to understand. Jesus is recognizing the existence of other voices, others who set themselves up as shepherds, but who do not truly care for their people. Jesus says, "*The sheep follow [the Good Shepherd] because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know his voice.*" Jesus acknowledges the presence of thieves and false shepherds who come not to care for their people but to steal, kill, and destroy. In a world of so many competing voices, how do you discern the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd?

"*The sheep follow him because they know his voice.*" I am confident that you have followed Jesus because you have heard him speaking in your life. When Jesus says, "*Follow me,*" he is asking us to listen only to him in our lives, to make his voice the basis of our words and actions in this world. Jesus is asking us to compare the many other voices we hear in the world with his voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd. He alone comes bearing peace, mercy, justice and love. He does not come

bearing war, cruelty, injustice or hatred. He comes not with vengeance and destruction but with understanding and reconciliation that can make friends, even of enemies.

In our very noisy world, discerning Jesus' voice is not easy. Who among us has not at some time thought or said, after being deceived, misled, or betrayed: "What was I thinking? Why did I even listen to you? How could I have believed in you?" In a world of many voices, often saying different things: Follow Jesus' voice. His voice is unchanging. You know his voice because he has been with you, helping you to walk through darkest valleys without fear. He will never abandon you so that you might never abandon others in their need.

Jesus lives so that you might have life and have it abundantly in him. This is what we do as a church, sharing our abundance with others. Today's reading from Acts describes what abundant life in him looks like. It is a life where believers gather and live together in harmony – like us today. It is a life of sharing our abundance with others, of pooling our financial resources to help all in need.

Each week we gather our gifts so that we might continue to care for others in our nation and community. Imagine nations and communities that pooled their resources to help all in need. Today, like those believers in Acts, we will gather downstairs to break bread with glad hearts as we envision our Fellowship Hall in new ways so that Jesus' voice might continue to be heard through us. We do all these things because we have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd in our lives.

He calls you by name. He knows who you are and how you are. He loves and cares for you. Follow his voice. He will lead you to green pastures and still waters so you might also offer welcome, food and water, goodness and mercy to others.

Amid all the other voices claiming to be shepherds, listen to his voice.

He alone comes bearing peace, love and mercy. Follow his voice all your life. Amen.