

## Sermon Notes for Sunday, April 26 – Gospel Reading

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These notes are intended to provide questions and entry spots into the Gospel reading for Sunday, April 26 through a Queer, inclusive, justice-oriented lens. This lens sees the Gospels and the ministry of Jesus as one that brings God's beloveds who have been marginalized back into the center of the community. If you are looking for a comprehensive analysis of all possibilities and options, the commentaries most preachers have on their bookshelves or saved in their digital libraries will be a better source for that other, more academic homiletic support. You will also have access to your own community's stories about shepherds and communities creating systems of support or providing safety to vulnerable people.

### John 10:1-10

I assure you that whoever does not enter the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens the gate for them, and the sheep listen to that one's voice. The shepherd calls their sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever they gather all the sheep, the shepherd goes before the flock and they follow, because they know the shepherd's voice. They will not follow a stranger but will run away because they do not know the stranger's voice."

Those who heard Jesus use this analogy did not understand what he was saying. So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

## Brief notes and comments on language

Note on the Text: The shepherd and the thieves and outlaws [ποιμήν or *poimēn*; κλέπτης καὶ ληστής or *kleptēs kai lēstēs*]

The version of the text appearing in this resource is adapted from the [Common English Bible](#) translation, with non-gendered language used for both the shepherd and the thieves/outlaws personified as “characters” in the metaphorical saying. Jesus is male, but there is no reason we are required to see shepherds as a group as exclusively male. Think about how “pastors” of any gender are often understood as “shepherds” of God’s beloveds in the congregations they serve. If “they” is not an option in a faith community, consider moving back and forth between “he” and “she” as you read the text for worship.

What are shepherds in relation to their flocks? What did the role of “shepherd” and the image of “shepherd” mean in Graeco-Roman society?

Shepherd, *poimēn* [ποιμήν] in Koine Greek, is a complicated image in Graeco-Roman society. While great leaders were often depicted as metaphorical “shepherds” of their people in ceremonial and formal legal texts, the shepherds, the people who worked with literal, and not metaphorical, sheep, *probatōn* [προβάτων] in Koine Greek, were seen and treated as the lowest of the low, the human members of the community with the least status and honor. This was true whether the people were free or enslaved.

What about the “thieves and outlaws” who are seeking to harm the sheep by leading them from safety to death and destruction? Who or what are they supposed to represent?

The Greek words used to name these dangerous thieves and outlaws in Jesus’ description of this scene are *kleptēs* [κλέπτης] and *lēstēs* [ληστής]. These same words show up much later in the passion narrative of this gospel narrative and the other three synoptic gospels. Two thieves are crucified on either side of Jesus, and an “outlaw” named Barabbas [Jesus Barabbas in *Matthew*] is offered up by Pilate as an alternative victim. Pilate gives the crowd a hideous choice of crucifixion or freedom for Jesus or

Barabbas. Another option when translating *lēstēs* is terrorist. An outlaw may have an agenda that turns them into freedom fighters like Robin Hood or Batman, but they usually only have their own power and profit in mind. The explanation in that passion text makes it clear that Barabbas is one of the latter kinds, a danger to the entire community.

What about the “gate” and “gatekeeper” as pieces of the metaphorical saying? Who or what are those words supposed to represent?

In this usage, gate and gatekeeper, *thyras* [θύρας] and *thyrōros* [θυρωρός] in Greek, are both meant to describe Jesus. In this metaphorical saying, as Jesus offers in his how explanation of what it means to his clueless followers, Jesus is simultaneously shepherd, gate, and gatekeeper. Truly a different kind of trinitarian construct altogether! Wherever we turn as members of the flock, Jesus is there to keep us safe. This contrasts with what has happened throughout the history of the Christian community, when people – usually men – set themselves up as gates and gatekeepers, making decisions on who is *in* and who is *out*. The understanding of Jesus as shepherd, gate, and gatekeeper reminds us that this is about Jesus, not us and our rules, whether we call them doctrines, Books of Discipline, or whatever.

## Brief notes and comments about the other readings

*Psalm 23* – If the worship leaders are not completely wedded to more traditional language and or musical selections, people’s attention to unexpected images and ideas that can have an impact on what it means to us. A straightforward way to disrupt the familiarity of the text is to read it in an unexpected version, like Eugene Peterson’s rendition in *The Message* or in the *First Nation’s Version: Psalms and Proverbs*.

*Acts 2:42-47* – If this text calls out to the preacher and worship leaders instead of the Gospel, this is the lectionary text that Peter Carlson focuses on in his preaching resource, *A Queer Lectionary: (Im)proper Readings from the Margins, Year A*, pp. 196-98.

*I Peter 2:19-25* – This epistle is about the endurance of believers as they/we respond to injustice and suffering in life. The writer draws a distinction

between the suffering and problems created by us, through our words or actions, and the suffering that comes when people walk the good road with Jesus. There is a shepherd reference at the end of the text, in verse 25, which might be one that makes sense to use in whatever message you end up preaching.

## Preaching Points

Below are options for questions that might provide opportunities to open up the text and see what in Jesus' metaphorical saying speaks God's truth to us today.

When Jesus the Shepherd promises that following him will mean "living life to the fullest" in his explanation of the metaphorical saying, what does he mean?

In this case, the preacher could compare this translation with others, in which the word "abundance" is used to translate the Greek words. Whatever language is used, what Jesus is talking about is the generosity mindset, where there is enough for all to have what they need to thrive not just survive or endure. What does it mean to live our lives to the fullest? That question can be answered so many ways, but since this is Jesus speaking, it is probably safe to assume that this full and abundance life is not one built on a foundation of property or sustained through power over other people. A full and abundant life is lived out in the way described in Acts 2:42-47, within a community that ensures that all means ALL when it comes to meeting basic needs – food, clothing, water, safety – but also when providing the resources that nourish the soul and stretch the brain.

Who are the thieves and outlaws leading the people of God to death and destruction today?

God's love for all creation is asymmetrical and all-inclusive. This is the message that resonates within scripture from text to text, from age to age of the people of God in history. As we scan the headlines and see words like "Christian" in statements by powerful organizations allied with governments or hear the word "Christian" spoken by lips of many of the leaders currently in power, that

message of love without limits or requirements is missing. They are using their power and public roles to try and lead the people of God away from the good road where we walk in the footsteps of Jesus. The bad road they want to lead us down is fenced by rules about gender roles and sexuality; it is a path that is littered with mines laid to destroy the innocent to protect the guilty.

When I was growing up, the thieves and outlaws I was warned about were nearly always about sexual morality – pre-marital sex, masturbation, having crushes on people of the same sex/gender – and there will no doubt be sermons that take that approach for this reading or others with images of false prophets or voices that lead us astray. But the need now for all followers of Jesus, not just those who have been marginalized by churches and governments, to open their eyes to the dangers of white Christian nationalism and the toxic, extreme individuality that is part of its appeal to people in our fractured and fragmented world. Or if not appear, then an explanation that helps us make sense of why membership in communities brings few to no benefits and restricts our freedom to choose to do whatever is best for us as an individual.