



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 26, 2026
EZEKIEL 34:7-15; PSALM 100; 1 PETER 2:19-25; JOHN 10:1-10

BEYOND A FREE-RANGE FAITH

John 10:1-10 [Jesus said, "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."]

Yesterday in this cathedral, 112 or so of your fellow Western Washingtonians across the Diocese officially chose the Episcopal Church as their sheepfold. In what is consistently ranked one of the least religious areas of the country, they made a public affirmation of their faith – and furthermore, their commitment to make their spiritual home among us. Given the not-so-subtle shepherd theme of our readings this week, I've been pondering the need for sheepfolds and the extent to which gates serve

us at all. Aren't we fed up with Christianity's self-appointed gatekeepers who think it's their job to say who's in and who's out, who warrants our concern and protection and who doesn't? Wouldn't a nomadic, free-range faith do less damage?

Lest my instinctive "don't fence me in" mentality cast too long a shadow, I decided to consult James Rebanks, an actual shepherd, via his excellent 2015 book *The Shepherd's Life*. He helped me make sense of the landscape Ezekiel describes in our

first reading and the prophet's seeming obsession with the mountain heights of Israel. The Lake District that Rebanks describes – with its English “mountains” – sounds oddly similar, at least in terms of how the land is used. In both landscapes, sheep find open pastures on the mountains and are periodically led by shepherds through gates to lower-lying enclosed sheepfolds for the individual attention and care that open pastures can't quite provide.

Sheep don't thrive completely on their own; neither do we. While we might not like being compared to sheep, we're not that different. We too need a stable food supply, direction when we're lost, protection from predators, medical care for what won't heal on its own, room to breathe, freedom to move... but also freedom to rest in a place where we're known by name. When Jesus says, “I am the gate for the sheep,” that's meant to be good news. Gates are not about trapping us inside; they swing out as well as in. We're meant to come in and go out and find pasture. In other words, we were never meant to find

everything we need inside the sheepfold; the point is to give us a place to be cared for and to grow so that we can go back out with greater strength and courage and generosity. If our faith in Christ doesn't expand our horizons and offer a lens to see a bigger, more wonder-filled world out there, then something is horribly wrong. Remember – Jesus came so that we “may have life and have it abundantly.”

At the same time, the Gospel today doesn't erase the thieves and bandits among us or deny their power. Pretending that what others say about Christianity doesn't impact us won't make our lives any easier. If, for example, we can at least name Christian nationalism for the blasphemy it is, we're less likely to be led astray by it. As today's psalm reminds us – all lands and all people belong to God, and are equally valuable in God's eyes, whether they belong to our sheepfold or not. Surely, it's good to know that we don't belong to the loudest voices claiming to speak for us as followers of Jesus. Whatever wisdom looks like these days, part of

it is knowing who's worth listening to, who is truly worth following.

That's where being part of a sheepfold can help. When we commit to a particular place and community, when we settle into a spiritual home and let the words and practices and people there shape us, we learn what to listen for amidst the chaos that surrounds us. We figure out what seasons look like in this place and in our lives, what in us is likely to thrive on this soil. We learn what can only be learned over time, in a place that has been shaped and sustained by multiple generations. We start to imagine a mercy that is everlasting, a faithfulness that endures from age to age, a God who truly is good and generous to all.

In our opening prayer this morning, we prayed that we might hear and

know the voice of Jesus, the good shepherd who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads. Easier said than done. But here are a few hints from someone who's been in the sheepfold for a while: Listen for a voice that cares for your safety – but also for the safety of those beyond your borders. Listen for a voice that is more interested in gates that let people in than in walls that keep people out. Listen for a voice that dares you to be generous and to live abundantly. Listen for a voice that sees the whole world as God's house and treats it as such. Perhaps above all, listen for a voice that invites calm and instills strength and courage in you. Listen for that voice, and Jesus can't possibly be far away. In the Name of the One who leads us out to open pastures... and who welcomes us back home, Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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