

Eyes to See Sermon Series
“Where the Shepherd Leads”
John 10:1-10
April 30, 2023
Rev. Joy Laughridge

John 10:1-10

10 ‘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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

During Covid when almost everything was shut down and we were shut away at home, I spent a lot of time doing puzzles. Some of you probably did, too. When I do a puzzle, I always start by putting the outer edge together, and then I move on to the obvious parts- like all the pink pieces that are part of a flower, or all of the letters that are part of a sign, and I save the sections like the sky or a big section of grass that are all one color for the end because those parts are hardest. To me doing a puzzle is relaxing, and I love the feeling of satisfaction that comes when I find just the piece I’m looking for and it snaps into place perfectly. When I’m doing a puzzle, I don’t mind going through the process of looking for pieces and trying a bunch of wrong ones on the way to finding the right one, but I have to say that I don’t necessarily get the same sense of satisfaction, and I don’t often enjoy the process of trying to solve real life puzzles. When it comes to trying to navigate and solve real-life puzzles and problems, I want clear, easy to understand, step-by-step instructions. I don’t want to have to look and look for the right answer, and I don’t want to go through the process of trying things that don’t work on the way to figuring out the right thing to do. When you’re trying to solve puzzles and problems in your own life, wouldn’t you just love to have at your fingertips the step by step, fail proof instructions that would help you successfully navigate every challenge you face at work, and in your family, and in your other relationships with people? Wouldn’t you love to receive a memo in black and white telling you *this* is the right choice, every time you’re faced with a difficult decision? I know some people seem to have it all figured out and we may imagine that some people do, but I think most people- even the ones that seem to have it all figured out- are looking for the help, and guidance, and wisdom that will help us solve the puzzles and find our way to living meaningful and satisfying lives.

For anyone who is looking for help, and guidance, and wisdom, there is plenty of it out there. There are tons of books in the self-help category that promise to provide the step-by-step, failproof instructions that will lead to success in parenting, and love, and health, and finances, and careers. There are also plenty of people- teachers, and speakers, and gurus; people with credentials and people with *no* credentials of any kind at all who promise that they have the wisdom and knowledge that you may be looking for. Some of them will even share it with you – for free if it helps expand their influence on Tik Tok or Instagram, or for money if it helps expand their bank account. Of course, some of the books are good and they contain real wisdom and helpful guidance, and some of the gurus and guides are good and

trustworthy, but sometimes they aren't. There are books and leaders who may promise that they can help, and someone might say that they have your best interests at heart, but it isn't always true. I listened to a podcast about a couple who promised on their Youtube channel that they could help people looking for love find their "twin flame," which is kind of like a soulmate but supposedly better somehow. The podcast was filled with stories about how people ended up either hurting others or getting hurt themselves because they listened to this Youtube couple and followed their advice. It's easy to say, "I would never fall for something like that," but the people who did fall for it probably thought the same thing. Some people are master manipulators. They can pick up on people's insecurities and vulnerabilities and speak convincingly into those places.

Even if we don't feel particularly vulnerable or insecure, the longing for wisdom and guidance that will help us navigate life safely and successfully is a human longing that most people seem to feel at some level. It's why people read self-help books, or seek help from religion, or just try to get advice from their friends, and it's a longing that springs up because all isn't as it should be in our lives and in the world. God created humankind and the world was set up to be a place where we could live in safety, and we could be engaged in meaningful work, and we could have peaceful relationships with God and each other, but then humans thought they could figure out their own way without having to listen to God. According to the Bible, the bad news is that instead of finding a better way when humans turned from God, they lost their way, and ever since then we have been lost and trying to find our way in a world that turned dark, and dangerous, and confusing. We sense that we need some kind of help, someone to lead us, and maybe some kind of protection as we try to find our way through life in this world. In the Bible, the Hebrew prophets captured this aspect of human experience by likening God's people to sheep, and they spoke of God as the shepherd who would gather them, and protect them, and lead them to safe pasture where they could flourish. Listen to these comforting words from Ezekiel 34.

"For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness" (vs. 11,12).

"I will feed them with good pasture..." (v. 14)

"I myself will be the shepherd of the sheep..." (v.15)

"I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." (v.16)

In the Gospel passage that we read this morning, Jesus picks up on this imagery and he connects God who promised to shepherd God's people and himself. His words in this passage are good news for when we feel vulnerable, and in need of protection; for when we are looking and longing for a wise and loving guide who will help solve life's puzzles and show us the way to a full and meaningful life. The good news that he delivers is the truth that he is our shepherd and the comforting assurance that comes with that good news is that when we belong to Jesus, we are never alone. We are never without a protector, and as much as it may feel like we are in total darkness at times, we are never without a leader and a guide who will show us what steps to take and what steps to avoid as he leads us toward the abundant and flourishing life that we long for. He promises that he will speak to us, and he says that we will be able to pick out his voice and recognize it as the voice that cares for us and tells us the truth.

As we go through our lives and we try to make good choices, and we try to figure out how to solve the puzzles and problems that cause us to feel worried and keep us up at night, it may feel like our

challenge is to try to find the person or the book that will give us the answers that we're looking for, but what we hear in our Scripture this morning is that if we have trusted Jesus, we already know the One who has the answers and the wisdom that we're looking for. We know who has the answers and the truth that will help us make wise choices and that will keep our feet firmly on the path that leads to life. The challenge is a challenge to actually *listen* to and to listen for the voice of our Shepherd and then to obey his voice when we hear it.

It can be hard to try to listen to a voice that is inaudible. It's much easier to give our attention to the audible voices all around us than it is to attend to the still small voice that speaks to our hearts. Listening for the quiet voice of the shepherd often requires that we slow down and take a break from our endless to-do lists and activities. It often requires intentionality on our part – intentionally asking for the ability to hear; intentionally making time and space for listening; intentionally giving our attention to the Scriptures and waiting for the Shepherd to speak to us through the words that we read there. When we take this kind of listening time, we may be surprised at what we hear or at how much more easily we seem to hear Jesus's voice.

He does meet us in the quiet places, but being quiet isn't the only way to listen for and to hear Jesus's voice. He may speak to us when we're on the go, too, or right in the middle of whatever it is we're doing. Sometimes we may experience hearing his voice as a "something" inside that compels us. "Something told me that I should call you." "Something kept me from saying what I really wanted to say in that argument."

We may also hear him as we do seek out help or guidance from the books or the teachers that are out there promising to help us. You may read something, and it feels right in your soul- there is a feeling of agreement, and comfort, and peace. Or, you may listen to someone who is offering some guidance or claiming to speak some truth, but there is something within you that feels uncomfortable with what you're hearing. Those feelings of comfort and agreement or of discomfort and unsettledness are ways that we hear the voice of our Shepherd.

We know what the bad news is- that there are people out there who promise to help or lead us who don't actually care about us and that finding our way through life, and figuring out the answers to our questions, and solving problems is hard, and some of you may be feeling the weight and the heaviness of the bad news as you sit here this morning. Some of you may be feeling a little lost, or there is a big decision to make that is on your mind, or maybe you're feeling stuck in a situation and can't see a clear way forward. God speaks to us today in the midst of whatever situation we find ourselves in this morning, and Jesus is alive and with us. He is our risen Savior who is present now reminding us that He loves us. He holds the wisdom and the answers that we are looking for. He knows the way to the place where will be safe and where we can thrive and live abundantly. Listen for his voice, and he will lead you. Amen.