



Sermon, May 3, 2020
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Cottage Grove and Junction City
United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Reboot! JP21

“Don’t Listen to Thieves and Bandits”

Scripture:

1 Peter 2:19-25 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁹ For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

²² “He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

²³ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

John 10:1-10 (NRSV)

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. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Sheep

Ah, sheep. Don’t you love this time of year as you drive along out in the countryside and see all the baby lambs? They are all so cute as they amble along, and then they kick up their heels and cavort around with the other lambs while their mothers go on grazing nearby. Sheep herding has a long history, and has been a very important occupation in the Middle East for thousands of years. You don’t hear anything about cowboys and ranchers in the Bible, but sheep and shepherds appear frequently.

Psalm 23, and Jesus as the good Shepherd - what does all this mean?



Take, for instance, today’s readings. Psalm 23 is very popular, and is easily memorized. It was supposedly composed by David, harkening back to the time when he was a young lad tending sheep, before he took up his occupation as slayer of giant Philistines. The Psalmist doesn’t reflect on his experience as a shepherd, rather, they reflect upon the experience of the sheep – of being in need of guidance, protection, and of daily care. God, to the Psalmist, provides that for us. Daily. It’s a nice poetic sentiment.

Shepherders I have known: True herd mentality, so need to be led

Now, over the years, I have come to know a few people who raised sheep for wool and mutton. One of the things that I picked up from them is the fact that sheep are true herd animals, but they aren’t terribly bright. They need someone to lead them. When herding sheep, the sheep follow the shepherd. This is different from cattle herding, where cattle are herded from the rear of the herd, and along the sides. Sheep you herd from the front. But they don’t just follow anybody, they follow the one they know.

Villigst – sheep know the shepherd’s voice

A little over two decades ago, I taught a class in Germany at a summer study program run by the Evangelische Kirche Deutschland at a place called Villigst. It was set out in the countryside in a converted manor house. There were still fields attached to the property, and sheep grazed right next to where we held classes. On my breaks from teaching I would walk around the area, and spent a lot of time observing the sheep. I was particularly struck by how they reacted when the man who tended them,



their shepherd, came into the fenced field where they grazed. As soon as he came in and called to them, they ran over to him and crowded around him, nuzzling him with their noses. I would stand by the fence and talk to them, and they paid me no heed. But as soon as their shepherd came in, they responded immediately.

Jesus mentions this: “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.” There it is: they know his voice.

But did you notice what he says: he also mentions being *the gate* to the sheepfold. Not only does he describe himself as being the shepherd, but also the gate. Now that has always been a bit puzzling to me, until I came across this story:

George Adam Smith, the 19th century biblical scholar tells of traveling one day in the holy land and coming across a shepherd and his sheep. He fell into conversation with him and the man showed him the fold into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls, with a way in. Smith asked him, “This is where they go at night?”

“Yes,” said the shepherd, “and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe.”

“But there is no door,” said Smith.

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“I am the door,” said the shepherd. He was not a Christian man and wasn’t speaking in the language of the New Testament. He was speaking from an Arab shepherd’s viewpoint. Smith looked at him and asked, “What do you mean you are the door?”

“When the light has gone,” said the shepherd, “and all the sheep are inside, I lie in that open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door.”

Be aware of thieves and bandits

All of this talk about sheep, and sheepfold gates and shepherds is set in the context of being wary of the thieves and bandits of faith. “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.”

Who and what are the thieves and bandits who lead people astray? You’ve heard that old expression about “wolves in sheep’s clothing?” Well, there are plenty of people who put on the act of being religious, perhaps even dressing up like preachers, who use religious phrases and might even impressively throw a lot of scripture at you, but are really more interested in lining their own pockets, or the pockets of other people whose pockets are already well-lined.

Of course, this raises the question: How do people get led astray?

1. By not knowing the voice of the shepherd. If your only dose of Christianity is listening to a preacher on Sundays or online or on TV, but you don’t study as well, if you don’t practice prayer and other spiritual disciplines, you aren’t getting the whole story.
2. By listening to the cool seductive voice of a faith that expects nothing of you and lets you off the hook regardless of what you do and what you leave undone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to this as “cheap grace”: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace

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without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.)

3. By wanting to hear a voice that pleases them and reinforces their prejudices and preconceptions about the world. If your faith doesn’t make you stop and reexamine all the things that you hold against other people, then it is not the faith of Jesus Christ. If you aren’t challenged and occasionally chastised, you’re playing at faith, not living it.
4. By listening to the voices of others who want you to listen to their voice, rather than the voice of the Good Shepherd. There are plenty of people who are all too ready to tell you what they think you should do, and will even tell you that “this is what a Christian should do,” but their words do not square with the plain teachings of Jesus, nor do they breathe the Spirit of Jesus.

Be familiar with the true voice of Jesus

Be careful and discerning about what people do with Jesus’ words. People love to bend scripture to their own advantage. Ask yourself:

- “Whose interests are being served here?”
- “Does this interpretation subject me or someone else to harm?”
- “Does it keep me or someone else in a situation that is physically or emotionally harmful?”
- “Does it perpetuate injustice, prejudice, unfairness, discrimination against anyone?”

If someone’s interpretation of the words of Jesus or of any scripture places themselves in a place of judgment, or of power over others, or in a place of gaining benefit at the expense of others, they are **not** breathing the spirit of Jesus. It is **not** the voice of the Good Shepherd. If their particular practice of faith causes them to deny services they provide for others regularly, they are probably not listening closely to the voice of Jesus. Thieves and bandits are everywhere.

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Therefore, as an antidote to the poisons circulating in the name of Jesus, do this: **read the Gospels first and foremost**. Familiarize yourselves with **what Jesus says and does**. Get to know his voice above the clamor of other voices.

Practice what Jesus says to do: forgiveness, suspend judging others, given witness to the God of love by doing that which is in the best interests of others as determined by them, do not begrudge the physical needs of others – feed, clothe, shelter, give water, etc. - love one another,

Practice nonviolence: if someone is loudly proclaiming how they love Jesus and are pulling a gun in your face to emphasize their faith, they aren’t listening to the voice of Jesus. Peter makes that clear in his letter that began our service today:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

It is by the wounds of Christ that we are healed. Thieves and bandits will run and save themselves, but the good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Listen to his voice. Follow his leading. Feed from his pastures. Drink from the streams of his living water. Love others the way he shows you to love. Do these things, and you won’t go astray.