

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Preparing for Sunday, April 30, 2023 // Easter 4, Year A

## The Gospel: 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."

## Background and general observations

*The chapter that immediately precedes these verses tells the story of Jesus healing the man who had been born blind. This miracle precipitated a controversy, and the result was that the religious leaders drove the man out of the synagogue. Here, Jesus seems to be making a distinction between himself (the Good Shepherd) and the religious leaders (thieves and bandits).*

*The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is further developed in chapter 10, through verse 18. But in these first verses alone, we have other images that can be applied to Jesus: the image of the gate and the image of the gatekeeper. In verse 7, Jesus says, "I am the gate," and in verse 11 (immediately following this passage), Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." These "I am" statements of Jesus will undoubtedly remind people of other such sayings in the Gospel of John, such as, "I am the vine," "I am the bread of life," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and "I am the light of the world." It's worth noting that to say, "I am the gate" is a very different assertion than to say "I am like the gate."*

*John is proclaiming Jesus as the incarnation of the eternal God, so it is not surprising that multiple symbols and metaphors are needed to tell us more completely who Jesus is. Some people find it helpful to ponder which images or metaphors are most meaningful or strike a chord. And it is also useful to spend some time with those metaphors that do not seem helpful at first. Are the images that seem strange to us our "growing edges" in the faith? Could it be that these images communicate something about the nature of God and God's relationship to us that might expand our understanding of God and deepen our faith?*

*Whereas chapter 9 of this Gospel deals with spiritual blindness, this passage moves from the metaphor of seeing to the metaphor of hearing, as we are invited to consider how sheep know or recognize the voice of the shepherd who takes care of them. This is another way of helping us ponder how human beings perceive or recognize the presence and activity of the Divine. In this passage, the metaphor conveys a special sense of intimacy, tenderness, and mutual recognition, as the shepherd calls each "by name," and the sheep know the shepherd's distinctive voice. Finally, this passage conveys the role of the shepherd to feed (lead to pasture), protect (from thieves and bandits), and to heal (the Greek word meaning "to save" also means "to heal" or "to make whole").*

## Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. A question sometimes asked during spiritual discernment is, “When you pray, do you feel you are praying to God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit?” The question invites a particular interior attentiveness. *Who AM I praying to?* In a similar way, this passage might lead you to wonder about the ways you perceive God’s role in your life.

Would you say that God feeds you? Protects you? Saves you? Heals you? Guides you? Does one role feel stronger than another? Is there a way you wish you perceived God, but perhaps do not? And what other metaphors would you use to describe God’s role in your life?

2. Some of the images Jesus uses in this passage to describe his relationship to his followers convey intimacy, belonging, recognition, safety, life and health. What words would you use to describe your relationship with Jesus? Is he a companion as much as he is a shepherd? Do you imagine him walking ahead of you as a guide, beside you as a friend, behind you as a protector and safeguard? Is he a practitioner of medicine, or is he the medicine itself? What roles, such as these, help articulate your relationship?
3. The “thieves and bandits” become their own metaphors and might represent not necessarily the wicked, but perhaps the selfish, or the desperate. Who—or what—are the “thieves and bandits” in our world today? And who or what are the “thieves and bandits” in your life?

In other words, who or what tries to steal your affection, loyalty, allegiance, and trust away from God? How successful have such “thieves and bandits” been in your life? What defense do you have against the forces that draw you away from God?

4. Jesus’ metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep teaches us that the One to whom we belong enters our life by “the gate.” Interestingly, a gate can be both an entrance and an exit. It allows in, but it also lets out; it both keeps in as well as keeps out. The gate in this passage seems to be a protected entrance (there is a “gatekeeper”) which guards against the thieves and bandits. Of course, there are other ways for thieves and bandits to enter just as there are other means of exiting, metaphorically, the sheepfold.

How do you perceive God entering your life? How do you perceive destructive forces entering your life?

In thinking about your own spiritual journey, have there been occasions where you believe you might have “exited” the sheepfold, or ignored the gatekeeper, or even forgotten the sound of the shepherd’s voice?

Have you ever felt somehow that the gate was keeping you out, rather than keeping you in? What do you know of your place in the pasture?

How do you perceive Jesus calling you, or calling you back? How do you think Jesus responds to our wandering or to our inattentiveness or to our carelessness?

Elsewhere, Jesus exhorts his followers to remain watchful and alert. What are some of the ways in which you remain watchful and vigilant in the spiritual life?

5. “They follow him because they know his voice.”

Our lives can be noisy. There are many “voices” calling to us and trying to get our attention. What is distinctive about God’s “voice”?

How can you tell the difference between a divine voice (or prompting, or call) and any other voices in your life? When is it that you are most likely to hear God’s voice? What do you know of positioning yourself, and your life, so that you are most receptive to what is distinctly divine?