

## “Who’s Your Shepherd?”

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Apostles Anglican Church

Scriptures: Nehemiah 9, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2, John 10.

There is nothing quite like the feeling that you get when you have been duped by an impostor. It seems that scams, whether by the telephone or by email, are ever present these days. And they are getting smarter. You know things are bad when those verification codes you get sent on your phone when you are locked out of your online account say in all caps, “DO NOT GIVE THIS CODE TO ANYONE. IT IS A SCAM.”

The most pernicious form of these scams is when the scammer pretends to be someone they are not to encourage a quick response. My grandparents have gotten a call from “me” telling them that I had been in a car accident and needed financial help right away. I think the scammer got my name and connection to my grandparents via Facebook. Thankfully, my grandparents checked in with my parents before taking any action. (Which side note, my unsolicited advice - just make your online profiles private.)

The scammers will even pretend to be clergy. If you ever get an email from one of us asking you to buy gift cards, do not do it, please. I had to chuckle when I received a message from “Fr. Jack” right in the middle of his time of pilgrimage on Mount Athos in Greece, because what he really needed in the middle of that time of holy and silent reflection, his retreat away from the things of the world, was for me to pop down to Kroger and get some gift cards for him.

If only all impostors were so obvious. Jesus speaks today of thieves and robbers, those who would claim to be our shepherds but are poor excuses for the real thing.

Identifying the True Good Shepherd is an important thing because shepherds provide, or at least claim to provide three things: identity, security, and direction. The wrong shepherd has the wrong plans for the sheep. While Jesus says that he comes to bring abundant life, counterfeit shepherds come to “steal, kill, and destroy.” They do so by warping the sense of identity of the sheep, feigning to protect them, and misleading them to their own ends. Jesus offers us our genuine identity, true security, and direction that is for the good of not only ourselves but for the whole world.

“He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” Identity. We belong to the shepherd. Jesus will shift his language after our reading to start speaking of *his* sheep in the following verses. We belong to him. He is our Creator. He calls us by our name. We are his. We belong to none other, not even ourselves.

If we identify with the wrong shepherd, we mis-identify ourselves. We miss where our value comes from and what we are here for. I’ve shared before what my Dad would call out to me as I left the house as a teenager, “Remember *who* you are and *whose* you are.” Getting those questions right makes the difference between an abundant life and a life that is stolen, killed, destroyed.

Security. Here we go to that well-known and well-loved Psalm appointed for today. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. The world is not always a safe place for sheep. There are difficult paths to walk and hungry predators lurking. But these are no problem for a shepherd willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

False shepherds throw in the towel when things get dicey. Jesus puts it this way beginning in verse 12 of John 10: "He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep." False shepherds only care about the sheep insofar as the sheep are beneficial to them and so the security they claim to provide is counterfeit.

Direction. "When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." Sheep without a shepherd makes for a whole bunch of lost sheep. When we have the shepherd who Created us, loves us, and is ready to lay down his life to protect us, that is the Shepherd who knows where we need to go. "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters." So many of us feel stuck, like we don't know where to go. Follow the Good Shepherd.

False shepherds lead you where they want you to go and they don't really care if it is for your ultimate good. There will be enticements along the way to keep you interested, but green pastures and still waters are not the destination that false

shepherds have in mind. They are headed to the slaughterhouse. As Jesus says: Steal. Kill. Destroy.

These are the stakes when it comes to the shepherd we choose to follow. Choosing the wrong shepherd will lead to our destruction. Here what Jesus says again about impostor shepherds:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.” And later to drive the point home, Jesus reiterates: “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.”

I think it is important that we recognize the presence of real imposters in Jesus’ message; Jesus is talking about real people. The people of Israel had multiple forces vying for their attention and allegiance, and all under the guise of what it meant to be the true Israel, the true people of God. These false shepherds offered false identity, false security, and false direction to the flock of Israel. Jesus had come to take his own back.

The religious authorities were one set of false shepherds in Jesus’ day. They heard Jesus’ words and were scandalized by them. If you continue reading down in verse 19 and 20 of John 10, you will see where the religious authorities accuse Jesus of having a demon for the ways in which he speaks about these things. They aren’t missing Jesus’ critique of them in these words about thieves and robbers and neither should

we. Remember what has come just before this passage, the healing of a man born blind in John chapter 9, an event that is in and of itself a restoring and protecting of one of the sheep of Israel, the blind man, by his true Shepherd, Jesus. But this wonderful event causes a ruckus among the religious leaders, who aren't ready to recognize Jesus as God. They kick the man out of the synagogue and harass his parents, all while their hatred for Jesus gets turned up one more notch. False shepherds don't like to have their authority questioned.

We too have those who are competing to be the ones to offer us identity, security, and direction over and against the true version of those things that is available to us in Jesus, and so I'd like to explore types of false shepherds that would lead us astray if we would let them.

For today, we are going to leave aside the existence of false shepherds within the Church and its leaders. This is an apparent reality, easily seen just by keeping up with the news. Suffice it to say that those who hold authority in the Church are not immune from being led astray, or leading others astray. Lord, have mercy on your Church. May her leaders point them to the True Good Shepherd and none other.

But in an increasingly post-Christian world, those that would sneak into the sheep fold are increasingly coming from outside of the institution of the Church.

The false shepherd of Mammon, the pagan god of material wealth, suggests that our identity, security, and direction are all about money. Our identity comes from how much of it we make. Our security comes from how much of it we have put away. Our direction comes in whatever path gets us more of it. Of course, it is never so blatantly

stated. The false shepherd is subtle in his pitch. He exploits the reality of our material needs and weaves it into the lie that there is never enough. But the identity of Mammon at best only lasts as long as we are able to produce at a high level. The security of Mammon is a false security, vulnerable, as Jesus says, to the thief that steals and the moth that destroys.<sup>1</sup> And the direction of Mammon is the way of destruction, not only of our own lives, but the lives of those around us. Mammon is a false shepherd.

The false shepherd of the self offers identity as the expression of the will, free of any constraint of the givenness of reality or the boundaries of morality. The shepherd of the self offers the security of self-actualization, of fully reaching your potential. The shepherd of the self offers the direction of whatever your heart truly desires. But the shepherd of the self is a false shepherd. Its world is so narrow it cuts us off from others and from God. The shepherd of the self turns our gaze so far inward that we do not see the suffering of our neighbor. The shepherd of the self elevates us and our desires to the throne of our lives, leaving no room for our Creator or his will. It is a way of destruction and death as we have seen over and over again since our first parents put themselves first in the Garden.

Today we also must name and be on the lookout for the false shepherd of politics. I had pondered this subject this week and settled on how I wanted to express the dangers of making politics our shepherd, only to wake up this morning to the news of yet another attempt at political violence. Jesus' words remain true - false shepherds come to steal, kill, and destroy. The false shepherd of politics gives us an identity in shared perspectives and, increasingly, shared enemies. The shepherd of

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:19

politics promises the security of power in the proper hands, a promised day where things will be put in order and utopia will drop from the sky. The shepherd of politics offers the direction of convenience, where values can be laid aside for the so-called greater good of political success. In politically tense moments like those in which we seem to keep finding ourselves, the most dangerous thought we can have about political idolatry, like any idolatry, is that we are not susceptible to it, that surely it is only a problem for other people. That is how compromises are made. Politics makes for a poor shepherd.

So how do we fend off false shepherds? We remember. Leslie Newbegin, a long time missionary to India who later returned to an increasingly secular West, saw the danger of false shepherds wrote this about the Church: "A Christian congregation is a community in which, through the constant remembering and rehearsing of the true story of human nature and destiny, an attitude of healthy skepticism can be sustained, a skepticism which enables one to take part in the life of society without being bemused and deluded by its own beliefs about itself."<sup>2</sup>

This is why, when the people of Israel returned to Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah, they remembered the Exodus, as we read in Nehemiah 9. This was the needed corrective after living for decades under the false shepherds of Babylonian captivity. And so they remembered how God had led their ancestors, like a shepherd, out of Egypt and through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The way to avoid falling in with false shepherds is to remember what the Good One is like. Knowing the real thing will help us spot the fakes every time.

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<sup>2</sup> Newbegin, Leslie. *The Gospel in A Pluralist Society*. As cited in the article here: <https://centralchurchnyc.org/post/detail/3>

“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.”<sup>3</sup>

Are you listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd this morning? Are you listening to the voice of a false shepherd? Their voices are not the same. The latter comes to steal, kill, and destroy. The former comes that you may have abundant life in him.

Listen for his voice. Listen by reading and meditating on his Word. Listen for the voice of his Holy Spirit. Do not be led astray by the many imposters who would steal you away from his fold. And may you say, with the rest of his people:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

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<sup>3</sup> John 10:3-4

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.