

“A Good Book to Read, Just Not the First”

John 10:1–10

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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What biblical book should someone new to the church read first? Probably not Leviticus, I think we'd all agree, and definitely not Revelation, unless we are interested in stimulating misplaced nightmares! There are some books that are easy to take out of the equation. But what would be a good first biblical book to read?

Many people suggest the Gospel According to John because of its simple language. John's prologue was the first text we read in my first Greek class because the vocabulary is simple. Almost anything seems easy after English, with all its exceptions, but John is pretty easy to read.

Yet while John's vocabulary may be simple, the themes and messages of this book are not. There are double entendres everywhere, like being born anew and from above. Jesus' acts of mercy and healing aren't just miracles; they are signs that point to who he is. There are challenging images, like that of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. And there are terms that have to be understood in context.

For example, John refers repeatedly to “the Jews” in a negative way. The author is referring to *some* Jewish leaders who oppose Jesus, but taken out of context, this terminology can be used to caricature all Jewish people, which is absurd! Jesus and his first followers are Jewish! Yet many have used such language to promote anti-Semitism. Reading these parts of John without understanding can be dangerous!

Even Jesus' vocabulary is different in John than it is in the synoptic Gospels. John is written later and for a different audience. So, all of this has to be factored in to our understanding of any Johannine text, including our reading from John 10. The familiar imagery we find here about sheep and shepherds is simple, but appearances can be deceiving.

The reading begins with Jesus saying, “Very truly, I tell you...” It is a rhetorical device that indicates that something significant will

follow. “Listen carefully to what I am going to tell you,” Jesus says, and then he says that anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd. The sheep hear his voice and he leads them out, but the sheep do not know the voice of strangers and thus will not follow them.

We may think we understand what he is saying because we’ve studied the text or heard sermons on it, but Jesus’ disciples do not understand. This could be their problem. They have been known to be a little slow, especially in the Gospel According to Mark where it often seems like we are reading about Jesus and the twelve stooges!

But John says Jesus is using a “figure of speech.” The Greek term *paroimia* can also be translated as a “veiled saying” or a “lofty idea.” In other words, Jesus is speaking in a way that is not easy to understand. He uses imagery that invites the hearer to ponder his words, to think more deeply, to avoid jumping to conclusions. All dense stories are like this. There is more to them; so, more is required to process them.

This makes the narrative richer, but it goes against the tide. We live in a soundbite age. People want quick and easy answers. Even the CliffsNotes version of a book like *The Lord of the Rings* is too long. We prefer fast-action stories to slow-moving character studies. Even a sermon should get to the point! But Jesus often asks more of us, he doesn’t always give us easy answers, he invites us to think more deeply.

In our text, he does go on to explain what he is saying. “Very truly, I tell you,” he says, “I am the gate for the sheep,” though as the text continues, he is also the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He says those who have come before him are the thieves and bandits, and the sheep do not listen to them. They have come to steal, kill, and destroy. He has come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

This sheds some light on the veiled saying, but who are these bandits and thieves? Is Jesus the gate or the shepherd or both? And if he is the shepherd, the good shepherd, whose voice the sheep know, trust, and follow, how can we be sure that it is his voice we are hearing?

Well, our first thought about the bandits and thieves may be that they are the religious leaders who question and oppose Jesus’ work. Just

before our reading, in John 9, Jesus heals a man born blind, but while he is overjoyed and his parents are astonished, some Pharisees are outraged. Jesus has healed on the Sabbath, which is a violation of sacred rules.

We might conjecture that they are also threatened by Jesus' miraculous abilities and growing popularity. But whatever the source of their opposition, they criticize Jesus, and then he says he has come into the world for judgment, that those who cannot see may see, and those who can see may become blind. The Pharisees hear this "figure of speech" as a pointed criticism of them. Are they blind now?

So, coming right on the heels of this encounter, it makes sense that the bad leaders who try to lead the sheep astray, the bandits and thieves, are these Pharisees. But there are other people who oppose Jesus and cause harm, including Roman authorities who have the final say in everything, including Jesus' death. And there are many who mislead sheep in our time - some religious leaders, some political.

In Jewish tradition and in the Greco-Roman world, shepherd imagery was used not just for religious leaders but political ones as well. Ezekiel 34 referred to kings as shepherds, and they were not good shepherds. Even though actual shepherds were not highly regarded by writers like Aristotle – he thought of them as being lazy... a presumptuous view for a philosopher, someone who makes a living by thinking about life – Aristotle described a king as a "benefactor of his people, inasmuch as he devotes his whole talents to their welfare, and tends them *as a shepherd does his sheep (The Nicomachean Ethics).*"

So, shepherding was used as an image for leadership, and there were good shepherds and bad shepherds, as there are today. This is obviously the case in our culture politically, but with some interest in self-preservation, I will just leave that there. In the world of popular religion, there are many well-known influencers who sell a kind of faith that is at odds with Jesus' teaching – guaranteeing wealth, relying on positive thinking more than the grace of God, promoting a violent approach to faith led by a warlike Jesus. But there are also shepherds in local churches who function like bandits and thieves.

I received a call from a member of another church in Warren County when we were in Warrenton. The man wanted to know if a

pastor in a Baptist church could fire the deacons and put in place new ones, and if it was customary for a new pastor to insist on re-baptizing every member of the church. This was a different kind of pastor from a seminary nearby that had changed. I told him the pastor could do those things, if the church let him, but it certainly wasn't Baptist! I suggested he read his church bylaws and see what guidance it gave. There are many bandits and thieves to this day. There are good shepherds and bad.

Jesus speaks of himself as a shepherd, the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He also says he is the gate through which sheep enter the sheepfold. So, which is he, the shepherd or the gate? He is both – the one who guides sheep into safe space and the one who cares for them there. He is using multiple images for himself and this is just the beginning, but it is a significant beginning for many reasons.

For one thing, Jesus is building on ancient Jewish imagery for God. We have heard the text sung today in lovely Scottish form. “The Lord’s my shepherd,” the psalmist says, “I’ll not want.” It is the same Hebrew verb, *haser*, that is used in Deuteronomy 2:7 in which God says that in the wilderness the people “lacked nothing.” They had challenges, but their needs were met - by God. God was and is the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep. Now, in John, Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. It is an image that communicates immediately to Jewish people. Jesus is Godlike.

But there is another layer of significance to this image. It is presented right after Jesus’ conflict with some Pharisees. They are questioning not just what Jesus has done in healing the man born blind on the Sabbath. They are questioning Jesus’ identity. They are wondering just who he thinks he is. This is how Jesus replies – I am a Shepherd who takes care of my sheep. They know my voice, they trust me, I am willing to give my life for them.

People today view Jesus in different ways, and if asked to prove his identity, many point to various miracles and theological arguments. Jesus says – I care for my sheep. This is what proves my connection to God – not the miraculous, not any arguments you can make, but the fact I love and care for all who are entrusted to me, like God.

This simple yet compelling image not only tells us who Jesus is, it offers guidance for how we hear his voice. Jesus says his sheep hear his voice, but people who claim to be his sheep hear different things about the same issues. So, who is hearing Jesus? How do we know we are accurately discerning his voice? Prayer, a deeper understanding of scripture, a willingness to examine our biases and keep an open mind – these things sharpen our hearing. But it is also wise to square anything we think we have heard with what we know of the character of Jesus, this gentle, loving Shepherd who cares for his sheep, all his sheep.

Spiritual discernment is a deeply personal venture. Judgment of others in this realm is precarious. But if someone thinks Jesus is calling them to be hostile to others because they weren't born here; to treat others differently because their skin is a different color; or to perpetrate or condone violence toward others simply because their ideas, beliefs, identity, or faith is different, it doesn't seem likely that Jesus is involved, not the same Jesus we read about in scripture.

The current issue of *Trend and Tradition*, the magazine of Colonial Williamsburg, includes an advertisement for the foundation that pictures a sweet little lamb nestling its face up against a mother sheep. I have been told by those who have raised sheep how dumb and difficult they can be – like most human beings, I would add – but they are still precious! It's a sense of this kind of preciousness that Jesus' imagery evokes, along with the practical realities that are involved in loving care, and he says he is the one who does all of this. If we are listening for his voice, this is the kind of voice we will hear.

And all of this comes from John. We began with the perspective that while John is a good biblical book to read, perhaps it shouldn't be the first. It requires prayerful study and reflection. But perhaps we should turn this around. John may not be the first biblical book we should read, but it is a good one to read, a really good one. For those willing to ponder carefully, there are profound insights, enlightening images, and deep assurances. In a world full of bandits and thieves who would lead us astray, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for us, speaks to us, and lays down his life for us. Thanks be to God!