

“But They Did Not Understand”
John 10 1-10; 1 Peter 2:19-25
Easter 4

John 10:1-10

“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.”

Introduction to I Peter

The letters of Peter were written at a time and in circumstances where it was not only dangerous to be a Christian but heartbreakingly divisive. Families would turn on family members who were following what was at that time called the Way. So there was not only a physical, but an emotional risk for those who chose to join the community that followed the risen Jesus.

Peter wrote to encourage that church:

1 Peter 2:19-25

¹⁹For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰If 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.

²¹For 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.” ²³When 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.

²⁴He 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. ²⁵For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Prayer

God of clarity and mystery,
Your holy word witnesses to your activity
in the universe, and in the events and affairs of the world,
and to your remarkable concern for creatures
as small as us, and even tinier.
And something else, something other, witnesses to your presence with us.
You speak your Truth from the farthest reaches of our perception,
and channel it to our minds and hearts
from somewhere deep within each of us.

God of stability and surprises,
You have planted us on terra firma,
on solid ground, in rich soil:
how a firm foundation is laid for our faith in your excellent Word.

God who has suffered for me,
when I feel abused,
I feel righteous in wanting to return the same abuse, or worse;
and when I see someone else abused,
I feel self-righteous and empowered to be ruthless, obnoxious—
to be violent in word if not in deed.
And I hear the voices baying
throughout my country and throughout the world:
“We have our beautiful, expensive weaponry;
now let us bring it to bear
and show that we are not to be trifled with.”

O God, save me, save us,
from the worst of what is within us,
from sinking to the appalling depths of which we are capable.

Lift our eyes instead up toward your light, we pray,
so that as we live in this world,
learning, daily, with your patient but insistent tutelage,
what it means to endure for the Truth and persevere for beauty,
we may embrace the life you have graciously bestowed upon us,
and share it just as abundantly as you do—
extravagantly, prodigiously—
in a hungry world whose lonely, haunted eyes
long for a sign of hope.

The Sermon

On the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus had seen a man who had been born blind, and had given him the gift of sight.

Neighbors and others who had been familiar with the blind man had a tough time figuring out how that had happened, so they brought him to the Pharisees, who, as usual in the New Testament, missed the point entirely and seized on the legal technicality that Jesus had apparently done work on a sabbath day, which was a serious no-no.

So the Pharisees—who, despite being almost always portrayed in the worst possible light in the gospels, seem to have been mainly faithful, well-meaning, generally reasonable people—convened a panel and summoned the man who could now see for questioning. Twice.

As they proceeded through a bumbling inquisition, *he* was baffled; the Pharisees conducting the interview were baffled; his parents were baffled...

According to John, by the end of the ordeal, the Pharisees—perhaps in frustration and fear—had begun to *revile* the man.

They said, without evidence, “You are *his* disciple (Jesus’ disciple), but *we* are disciples of Moses. We *know* that God has spoken to Moses. But as for this man, [Jesus], we don’t know where he *comes* from.”

And the man who'd been given his sight answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! *You* all don't know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. *We know* God doesn't listen to sinners, but does listen to one who worships God and obeys God's will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man, Jesus, were not from God, he could do nothing."

They answered him with the hopelessly flawed theology that we fall back on when our emotions take over and we just unleash our most ignorant prejudices and fears about people—in this case, someone who was born blind and now, miraculously, terrifyingly to them, can see just fine:

They said, "You were born entirely in sins, and are *you* trying to teach *us*?"

And they threw him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" And the man with new eyes answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."

Jesus said, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." And the man said, "Lord, I believe."

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Some of the Pharisees were right there, and they heard Jesus say that, and they said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Jesus said back to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."ⁱ

And that's when he launches into a truth-telling recitation, which is indicated in John's gospel every time Jesus says, "*Amén, amén, lego ^humin*" (Ἀμήν, ἀμήν, λέγω ὑμῖν).

Twenty-five times in John's gospel, Jesus starts a saying with that phrase that the NRSV translates, "Very truly, I tell you."

He says that when he's about to say something that will come as a surprise to his audience; when he's going to share something startlingly new; when he's about to correct a misconception, or potentially start a controversy.

And when he uses those words, what he is about to say is practically always a part of his self-revelation to the world of who he is, and therefore who God is.

And it's always, always, something that, if the world could absorb it, would turn everything we think we understand about living in this world upside down.

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3).

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (3:5).

“Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (5:25).

“Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (6:26).

“Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (6:53).

“Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (8:58).

“Very truly, I tell you,” he says to the Pharisees, whom he has just accused of a certain kind of blindness, and who have overheard him talking to the formerly blind man who now can see:

“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; they'll run from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

The literalists in the group are asking themselves, “When did we start talking about sheep farming all of a sudden?”

The allegorists are thinking, “All right, so, ‘bandit’ is to ‘climbing over the fence’ as ‘shepherd’ is to ‘coming in through the gate.’”

And the people who deal in metaphor are thinking, “OK, so God’s people are like sheep, and there’s a shepherd, and there’s a gatekeeper, and there’s a gate. And bandits who climb over the fence. So, what does that make this guy? And what does that make us?”

I don’t know that this episode is meant to be inflected as Comedy Night at the improv, but I am fond of the mental picture that it conjures up of Jesus speaking to a sea of faces that never register anything other than absolute and total lack of comprehension.

“The gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought them out, he goes ahead, and they follow him. They won’t follow a stranger; they’ll run, because they don’t know the voice of strangers.”

Umm...what?

“All right, let me try this again.

“*Amén, amén, lego humin.* 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.”

Squinting eyes; scratching foreheads... They shift their weight and try to look like they’ve just about got it.

“But wait a second...I thought you were the shepherd. Haven’t you heard all the hymns? Nobody’s out there singing, ‘Savior, like a gate lead us.’”

He says it again:

“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

And now he has finally come to the crux of it, something that everybody can understand, regardless of whether or not they can figure anything else out:

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; *I came that they may have life*, and have it abundantly.”

No matter who we are—disciples or Pharisees, blind people miraculously healed or neighbors who have learned not to trust when something seems too good to be true—our minds are not always up to the challenge of “figuring out” the larger framework of God’s presence or the Spirit’s activity among us.

The good news is: we don’t have to figure it all out before we know what we are supposed to do. We’ve already heard his voice, and watched and learned what he wants from us.

If you’ve heard his voice, you already know what to do.

Her name is Pippa; she’s a young writer and board member of an organization called Onwards, a non-profit that seeks to eliminate poverty through micro-enterprise development and travel opportunities.

When she was a teenager, her high school sent 15 girls to work for a week at an orphanage in Tanzania. Their mission was to build a library.

“Turns out,” she said, “that we...were so bad at the most basic construction work that each night the men had to take down the structurally unsound bricks we had laid and rebuild the structure so that, when we woke up in the morning, we would be unaware of our failure. It is likely that this was a daily ritual. Us mixing cement and laying bricks for 6+ hours, then undoing our work after the sun set, re-laying the bricks, and then acting as if nothing had happened so that the cycle could continue.

“Basically,” she said, “we failed at the sole purpose of our being there. It would have been more cost effective, stimulative of the local economy, and efficient for the orphanage to take our money and hire locals to do the work, but there we were trying to build straight walls without a level.

“That same summer, I started working in the Dominican Republic at a summer camp I helped organize for HIV+ children. Within days, it was obvious that my rudimentary Spanish set me so far apart from the local Dominican staff that I might as well have been an alien. Try caring for children who have a serious medical condition...in a language that you barely speak...

“Now, 6 years later, [I’m still] involved with the camp programing, fundraising, and leadership. However, I have stopped attending, having finally [accepted] that my presence is not the godsend I was coached by non-profits, documentaries, and service programs to believe it would be...

“It wasn’t the work that was bad,” she realized. “It was me being there...

“Now...the camp director, program leaders and all but a handful of counselors are Dominican. Each year we bring in a few...highly-skilled volunteers from the USA who add value to our program, but they are not the ones in charge. I think we’re finally doing aid right, and I’m not there.”ⁱⁱ

When she first set out to do some good, she went with people who were, like her, faithful, well-meaning, generally reasonable people. But it was only after the encounters—after some failures, after facing her own inadequacies, after some careful and thoughtful listening, that she began to understand.

We are expected to listen and learn and serve God and humankind ever more faithfully, ever more thoughtfully, ever more in the way that Jesus would have us do.

We’ve already heard his voice, and watched and learned what he wants from us. If you’ve heard his voice, you already know what to do.

He came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

And he tried to open our eyes to the existential reality that God is God;

and the nature of God’s relationship to us—that is to say, God’s love for us—has been revealed in God’s son, Jesus of Nazareth.

I know that I will never understand everything.

But I know that if anyone is hungry, I have work to do.
And if anyone is homeless, I've got work to do.
And if anyone is sick, or afraid, or lonely, or desperate, or needy,
I've got work to do.

And as long as I have food to share,
resources to allocate,
and love to give,

I know what I'm supposed to do.

And I know that now is the time.

If there is a symphony I will want to have written, I need to start composing.

If there is a book I want to write, I need to start writing.

If there is forgiveness I need to seek, now is the time for me to seek it.

If there is peace I want to achieve, I need to be working for peace right now.

Whatever is, for you, the best of life, the most important, the most affirming,
the most worthwhile, the most meaningful, of greatest benefit to the world,

think about those things, and think about what you are here to do.

Who is God calling you to be? And will you have been on board when he
tells you that he came so that we—so that everyone—may have life, and
have it abundantly?

I invite you to say the 23rd Psalm with me if you like:

**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;**

**thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**

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ⁱ John 9:28-41.

ⁱⁱ Pippa Biddle, “The Problem With Little White Girls, Boys and Voluntourism” *Huffington Post*, THE BLOG 02/23/2014 11:01 am ET | Updated Apr 25, 2014
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pippa-biddle/little-white-girls-voluntourism_b_4834574.html)