

John 10:7-15

“A Good Shepherd for These Times”

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Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020

Most people would agree, I think, that life is harder without good leaders. If you have ever been in a classroom without a teacher, for example, you know how things can devolve! If you’ve come upon the scene of a car accident before the police officer arrives, you know that with the traffic it’s hard to get where you want to go! We’ve heard the stories of bad bosses, military maneuvers under poor generals, and stalemates in diplomacy.

In the current fight with the unexpected and formidable corona virus, across all realms of society, we have experienced a mixed bag of leadership: both inept and that of integrity, and it is definitely more difficult to navigate the unknown when the stakes are high and leadership is hit and miss.

From Jesus’ teaching in John, we can create a quick list of some of the qualities of *poor* leadership. False shepherds do not hold the well-being of the flock as their highest value. They steal, kill, and destroy, or at least create confusion, divide and scatter the sheep. More concerned about themselves, they don’t protect the sheep from predators, denying the danger or running away from it. Jesus calls these “thieves,” “bandits,” and “hired hands,” with no investment in the livestock.

Life is harder in the absence of good leaders.

But Jesus’ teaching does not leave us in discouragement. I take heart in two points of good news this morning:

First of all, you and I are able to recognize good leadership when we experience it. Jesus speaks of sheep knowing the voice of the One they should follow, and if they don’t hear it, they won’t listen. In other words, poor leaders lose their audience and their authority, at least eventually, while good leaders inspire respect and get things done.

Doris Kearns Goodwin describes in detail the leadership of Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression. When the country had achieved the ambitious goals of the First 100 Days, he praised the special session of the 73rd Congress for its “spirit of teamwork” that had “transcended party lines” and “the whole-hearted cooperation between the legislative and executive branches.” He continued that this approach had “proven that our form of government can rise to an emergency and can carry through a program in record time.” She also comments that the “reciprocal connection between Roosevelt and the people he served lay at the heart of his leadership.”¹

The context in which Jesus offered this teaching about shepherding was the political leadership of the occupying Roman Empire and the religious leadership of the Sanhedrin, including the Pharisees. Then, after his Resurrection, Jesus’ followers

¹Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 304-5.

returned to this teaching. I think about that forty-day season of flux – the liturgical season we are in right now – when neither Peter, Mary, or John were ready to lead. It must have helped them all to remember that they actually *did* already have a leader in their risen Lord and Savior! **This is the second point of good news.**

You see, Jesus is the Gate through which you and I go in and out and find pasture – what we need – indeed, *abundant* life. He is a leader who truly *cares for* us, always on guard against dangers, willing to sacrifice his own comfort – even to lay down his life for us! This is One who *knows us* better than we know ourselves, and from this deep connection, he speaks and guides us today.

The word translated as “good” in the Greek actually means excellent or superior, the ideal or model shepherd. No matter what is going on around us with earthly leaders, we can rely upon the Good Shepherd, that is, the *best* shepherd: Jesus Christ.