

March 3: John 10

Jesus tries to communicate the meaning of his ministry through a series of parables. First, he asserts “I am the gate”, asserting that he is the way through which the sheep achieve safety and the meeting of their needs (in the pasture). The sheepfold was a stone enclosure, and the only way in or out was through the gate. The gatekeeper could be John the Baptist. No one understood what Jesus was trying to say here, so he switched gears and connected himself with the image of the shepherd, a common image for the way in which God and the kings and the religious leaders of the earth were expected to care for the people entrusted to them. To understand Jesus’ words about being “the good shepherd”, they must be read in connection to Ezekiel 34: 1-24 and Jeremiah 23: 1-6. The thieves and bandits are the false messiahs/revolutionaries who came before Jesus. The hired hand is the Pharisees and other religious leaders who cannot possibly care for the sheep the way the shepherd can. When things get difficult they run away from their responsibilities to care for the people. Jesus not only cares for the sheep in times of difficulty, but even to the point of laying his life down to save the sheep. A hired hand would never sacrifice his life to save the sheep in his charge, he would just move on to another pasture to tend.

Vs. 10 is the mission of Jesus throughout the gospel of John, as well as the foundation of liberation theology: Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly! Whatever gives abundant life is of Jesus, whatever takes away or diminishes abundant life (oppressive systems) is of the forces of evil.

Vs. 16, the “other sheep” could be diaspora Jews, Samaritans, and/or Gentiles. Given the inclusive way the early church’s ministry unfolded, it’s likely Jesus is suggesting all of these. Everyone is gathered into the fold of the good shepherd. Everyone is welcomed. Jesus’ mission is for there to be one united flock.

Beginning in vs. 19, there is again confusion and conflict over his message. Some say he’s crazy, others say he’s demon possessed, and still others defend him on the grounds that he opened the eyes of a blind man.

Vs. 22-42, It’s Hanukkah! The festival commemorates the re-dedication of the temple by Judas Maccabbeus in 164 BC after Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple by sacrificing a pig in the holy of holies. In this passage, the Jewish authorities are tired of parables, they want Jesus to tell them plainly whether he is or isn’t the Messiah. Jesus’ answer is frustrating “I’ve told you already and you don’t believe because you don’t belong to my sheep, who hear my voice and follow me.” Jesus promises to give his sheep more than any other sheep of any other shepherd have ever received –eternal life! Jesus then tells them plainly, “the Father and I are one” which is blasphemy in the highest degree! Again, they try to stone Jesus, Jesus defends himself on the grounds of the amazing works he’s been able to do through the Father, but the religious authorities can’t appreciate those amazing works because they are hung up on the very serious blasphemy he’s committed by making himself equal to God. Jesus again narrowly escapes arrest. It’s no longer safe for him in Judea, he withdraws to the wilderness where John had been baptizing, and in the wilderness many believed in him because they remembered what John had said about him and recognized that those assertions had come true.