

In defense of the hired hand (John 10:11-18; Acts 4:5-12)

A hired hand is all I've ever been, professionally speaking.

by [Nadia Stefko](#)

April 20, 2018

To receive these posts by e-mail each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

There is something that doesn't sit well with me right from the start of this Gospel passage: the characterization of the hired hand. He is fearful and careless. This doesn't sit well for selfish reasons—because a hired hand is all I've ever been, professionally speaking. My titles have included farmhand, fry cook, server, assistant, caregiver, and now associate rector. I've never owned my own business or flock, never been an Executive Anything. And yet I'd like to think I've done good, faithful, strong, even excellent work.

John's Jesus does not speak highly of the hired hand. And so I'm left wondering: Is there a better version of the hireling we might envision, or aspire to be? After all, we're not the shepherd—Jesus is. And though we try to pattern our life and our faithfulness after his, it's not our place to become the shepherd.

Peter and the other apostles in Acts embody this better sense of the more careful, committed hired hand that I'm looking for. They go around healing and preaching boldly, but always in the name of the Good Shepherd who commissioned them. Aren't they, in some sense, hired hands for Jesus? Aren't we?

I suspect the key distinction here lies in the sense of the "hiring." God doesn't just hire us; God calls us by name. God claims us and makes a covenant with us in baptism (and with some of us again, through ordination). God's devotion to us

remains steadfast, even when we, hired hands that we are, would scatter at the sight of the wolf, fleeing for a time to some seemingly greener pastures. Even when our behavior would justify our firing, God keeps showing up, with an endless supply of second chances. Always ready to make all things new.

Ideally we're not just in it for the money the way John's hired hand is. But we also don't have the same burdens of ownership that the shepherd does. In fact, it's precisely when we start to think that we do—when we try to function as the owner of the mission rather than as God's missionaries—that we tend to get into trouble.

So perhaps the goal of discipleship is to chart something of a path between the Good Shepherd himself on the one hand and the fearful, careless hireling on the other. We can try to be like the apostles, leaning into the claim God has placed on us. Speaking truth, working for healing, taking risks in the world. But always pointing back to the one we are working for—the one who calls us by name and sets us on the path.