

April 30, Easter 4A (*Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; John 10:1-10*)

The church in Acts 2 will follow Jesus, for they know his voice.

by [Jenna Smith](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue

“Listen to the sound of my voice.” What does this phrase evoke for you?

For me, it brings me back to my childhood, when my sisters and I would play in our dark, cavernous basement. We would guide each other toward the stairs by following each other’s voices. In a pitch-black space, my path was traced by sound.

In this week’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells of sheep following a shepherd’s voice, trusting him rather than a stranger whose voice they do not recognize. The contrasting images are somewhat stark in this parable: the stranger versus the familiar, the thief who breaks in versus the true shepherd using an open gate, the act of killing or destroying versus life and abundance. Jesus’ strong imagery makes more sense once we recognize that this scene takes place in the middle of a debate, riddled with emotion and theological impact.

A few verses earlier, Jesus heals a blind man who is begging by the side of the road. This is scandalous because some people reckon his blindness is deserved, caused by his sins or those of his parents. On top of that, Jesus heals him on the sabbath. A strong argument ensues between the blind man and the local religious leaders, who cannot believe Jesus is from God. The newly healed man, quite the apologist, rebukes them: “I do not know whether this man has a bad heart,” he says. “But this I do know: I was blind and now I see” (John 9:25).

Jesus is pulled into the fight, and through the power of story he attempts to reassure his listeners that his acts are indeed those of God. It would be easy to read this parable simply as an othering of the religious leaders, to pin them as the so-called false shepherds. But to do so would be to ignore a much more potent message: the parable’s invitation toward generosity.

The generous shepherd imagery from John 10 mirrors this week's psalm. While the psalmist writes from the perspective of the sheep, Jesus takes up the shepherd's voice: "I am the gate for the sheep. . . . Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." Jesus' miraculous healing, too, is an act of generosity. It turns out God's goodness is big enough to heal the blind, to reveal itself on the sabbath, to flow through the fingers of the Christ, to manifest itself beyond law and tradition and social mores. No wonder people were confused and insecure!

The generous shepherd image lays a prophetic blueprint as to how the early church would understand and apply its ethos. This week's reading from Acts 2 is witness to this. The members of this first Christ-centered community sell their possessions to care for those in need; they break bread together and practice a lifestyle of hospitality, teaching, and worship.

One of the main questions in the theological debate that leads up to the passage in John 10 is, "How do we know this man [Jesus] is from God?" At the end of the day, Jesus' answer is so very simple: trust my caring and generous acts. He demonstrates this time and again in his ministry, and his first church will follow suit as they live into a tradition of communal generous shepherding. They will follow him, for they know his voice.

Much like Psalm 23 ends in abundance, so Jesus concludes this parable in an abundant image of his care, described so beautifully in the First Nations Version of the Gospel of John: "Following the Shepherd, they will go in and out and find good food to eat. Thieves enter only to take away life, to steal what is not theirs, and to bring to ruin all they cannot have. I have come to give the good life, a life that overflows with beauty and harmony." The shepherding imagery continues after this week's reading, describing his ultimate act of generosity: giving his life for his sheep.

This is how the generous shepherd will give way to the abundant Easter.