

Rebirth: “Ongoing Conversion”  
“The Shepherd and the Shepherded”  
Ezekiel 34:7-15  
Psalm 100  
1 Peter 2:19-25  
John 10:1-10

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter, the good news is that Jesus being raised from the dead is not to improve the improvable; not to perfect the perfectible; not to teach the teachable; but to raise the dead.<sup>1</sup> Jesus was raised from the dead so that we too can be raised from the dead, both now and for eternal life. Jesus is here and wants to raise each one of us from some aspect of being dead. Rebirth, ongoing conversion continues. The Good Shepherd is here to shepherd.

What is the connection between discipleship and being God’s sheep? Apart from Jesus, we are condemned in our sin. On the cross, Jesus represented humanity and redeemed us from our death sentence. We can trust Jesus as our advocate. We can trust Jesus as our Shepherd. And as followers of Jesus, we are to behave differently, uniquely, and hope-fully.

An early Christian document known as the *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. A.D. 120-200) is believed to have been written by a man named Athenagoras. In one important section the author describes how Christians are alike—and different from others:

The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is not a matter of nationality, or language, or customs. Christians do not live in separate cities of their own, speak any special dialect, not practice any eccentric way of life. ... They pass their lives in whatever township—Greek or foreign—each man’s lot has determined; and conform to ordinary local usage in their clothing, diet, and other habits. Nevertheless, the organization of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable, and even surprising. For instance, though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like transients. ... Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live after the flesh; their days are passed on earth, but their citizenship is above in the

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<sup>1</sup>Idea gleaned from Robert Farrar Capon, *Between Noon and Three: Romance, Law, and the Outrage of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 129.

heavens. They obey the prescribed laws, but in their own private lives they transcend the laws. They show love to all men—and all men persecute them. They are misunderstood, and condemned; yet by suffering death they are quickened into life. They are poor, yet making many rich; lacking all things, yet having all things in abundance. ... They repay [curses] with blessings, and abuse with courtesy. For the good they do, they suffer stripes as evildoers.<sup>2</sup>

Athenagoras documents the community of Christians in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. Their faith in Jesus Christ caused them to look to Jesus as the Shepherd and take his lead on how to live to impact others and stick together in accountable relationships with one another. Jesus shepherded the communities of Christians in the known world. Jesus being raised from the dead established a common ground for all humanity.

Ezekiel 34:7-15, Psalm 100, 1 Peter 2:19-25, and John 10:1-10 unequivocally declare what the relationship is between the Shepherd and the shepherded: as individuals and communities of faith, abide in the Shepherd with joy abounding.

Followers of Jesus are the sheep. Jesus is the Shepherd. Being shepherded heals, gives hope, rebuilds lives, and invites us to participate in God's mission. Being shepherded offers a vision of a community committed to mutual support; a group gathered in one heart, mind, and soul in which no one claims private ownership of any possessions; and as much as possible is held in common. God is faithful to God's covenantal promise and we as the church are to demonstrate a stewardship of our resources for the betterment our faith community, our individual lives, and the lives of others outside this campus. Discipleship, the Shepherd discipling the sheep, demonstrates loving God, loving others, and making disciples. Jesus says, "Head toward my voice."

Hearing and heeding Jesus' voice is critical for our discipleship, that is becoming more like Jesus. First, The Shepherd knows his sheep. **Jesus knows your name.** John 10:9 reads, "I

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<sup>2</sup>Source: James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community* (IVP, 2010), 28-29.

am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” Jesus himself is the door or gate of the sheepfold. Listening to and following Jesus have the benefits of care, nurture, and safety. Jesus declares himself the Good Shepherd. Placing your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is rebirth and the journey of ongoing conversion continues. Second, **there is a thief who exists to steal from you.** The thief steals hope, peace, joy, and love. As Teilhard de Chardin reminds us, “...we are primarily spiritual beings having a human experience.”<sup>3</sup>

God is involved in all the disparate human experiences we have. However, the thief steals key components of our identity in Christ, and replaces parts of that identity with a low sense of self and sense of worth. We must return our attention to the Good Shepherd, Jesus, for from that relationship we can recover the things the thief has stolen.<sup>4</sup>

Remember, being discipled by the Shepherd through the shepherds of the church is imperative. As Brandi Carlile writes in *Broken Horses*, “I’d like to dedicate this book to my family...Most of all the family of fellow misfits on the island of the misfit toys. Anyone who’s been rejected by this realm and its interpretation of your faith, but never by your Creator. To be repulsed, rejected, reformed, reaffirmed, the redeemed. Your immeasurable worth precedes you.”<sup>5</sup> Those rejected or oppressed by others are the subjects of God’s redemption.

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<sup>3</sup>Teilhard de Chardin as referenced by Shannon Michael Pater in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, 444.

<sup>4</sup>In the five paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Ian A. McFarland, Karoline M. Lewis, Rhodora E. Beaton, Cynthia L. Rigby, Beverly Zink-Sawyer, Margaret P. Aymer, and Ruben Rosario Rodriguez as found in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 241-243, 243-244, 245-246, 247-249, 249-250, 251-253, and 253-254.

<sup>5</sup>Brandi Carlile, *Broken Horses* (New York: Crown, 2021), 1.

To recover the 2<sup>nd</sup> century characteristics of Christians and reframe those characteristics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century remember the following from the *Epistle to Diognetus*,

Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live after the flesh; their days are passed on earth, but their citizenship is above in the heavens. They obey the prescribed laws, but in their own private lives they transcend the laws. They show love to all men—and all men persecute them. They are misunderstood, and condemned; yet by suffering death they are quickened into life. They are poor, yet making many rich; lacking all things, yet having all things in abundance. ... They repay [curses] with blessings, and abuse with courtesy. For the good they do, they suffer stripes as evildoers.

Christians are here in the flesh, but are not to live after the flesh. We live our lives on this earth, but our citizenship is in heaven. We obey the laws of the land, but transcend them by living the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, the Sermon on the Mount, and Matthew 25.

Christians love all people and are misunderstood. Some live below the poverty line, in the middle class, and the upper class, yet together we are to make the poor rich. We lack all things, but have all things in abundance. Christians repay curses with blessings and abuse with courtesy.

The church is God's flock. The elders, deacons, and pastors are God's shepherds. There must be a two-way trust between the flock and leadership, and the leadership and flock. Leadership looks to the Good Shepherd to lead as Jesus would. Together, flock and leadership hear the voice of Jesus calling all to love God, love others, and make disciples. In this way the body of Christ demonstrates time and time again that... Love wins. Death loses. Amen!

*This sermon was preached (for the In-Person and Livestream congregations)  
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