

## **“Lying Down on the Job”**

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

*A Reflection for the Second Sunday of Lent,*

*beginning a series on John 10.*

John 10:1-10

February 25, 2018

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Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

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I saw *Darkest Hour* this week. The movie is about May 1940. England is in crisis. The Nazis are winning. Belgium has fallen. France is teetering. The British army is trapped at Dunkirk. Should England fight on? Or make peace with Hitler? The government is divided. Then, Winston Churchill steps forward and speaks out: *“We will never surrender!”* The nation follows its leader.

Leaders! We know bad ones. We know good ones. Shelves are full of books about leadership. Most leaders want to lead well. We want to be well-led.

Folks are wondering about Jesus. Is he a prophet, or a deceiver? Is he from God, or against God? Is Jesus the messiah? Messiah is a leadership word. When you hear “messiah” or “christ,” think “king.” That’s what it means. A messiah is a king, promised by God to lead God’s people. There was a crisis of leadership. Folks were divided about what to expect in a messiah. And they were wondering about Jesus.

### II

So Jesus starts talking about sheep farming. His concern isn’t wool or lamb chops. Shepherding is a way to talk about leadership. Who is the right leader for God’s people?

This was a long tradition. Some 500 years earlier, the prophet Ezekiel confronted a catastrophic failure of leadership.

*Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves!  
Should not shepherds feed the sheep?*

*You eat the fat.  
You clothe yourselves with the wool.  
You slaughter the fettleings.*

*Yet you do not feed the sheep.  
You have not strengthened the weak.  
You have not healed the sick.  
You have not bound up the injured.  
You have not brought back the strayed.  
You have not sought the lost.*

*Instead, with force and harshness you have ruled them.  
So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd.*

*Scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.  
My sheep scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.  
My sheep scattered over all the face of the earth.  
They had no one to search or seek for them.<sup>1</sup>*

Leaders fail when they are in it for themselves. So says God.

Leading is about feeding, strengthening, healing, binding up, bringing back, seeking the lost. That's a strong leader. So says God!

When leaders fail, the people suffer. They are scattered, unprotected, lost and not found. So says God. A crisis of leadership! We see it! Those in Jesus' day saw it. And they were wondering about Jesus.

### III

So Jesus talks about shepherds.

Individual shepherds brought their own flocks together at night, into one larger flock in a shared sheepfold. There was safety in numbers, and they could take turns watching.

So imagine you are on watch in the nighttime, and see someone approaching. Is it a fellow shepherd, or a thief? How do you know?

Jesus said, "*anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.*"

A real shepherd comes to the gateway, to you as you're keeping watch. A bandit tries to slip over the wall, unnoticed.

What does that tell us about the true leader for God's people? Will that person be out in the open, or sneaking around? Jesus points his accusation against those who were claiming to be leaders. Why were they acting like bandits? No, God's people need their true shepherd who comes to them honestly.

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 34:2b-6. I've adapted this translation from the NRSV.

#### IV

When morning comes, the shepherds take their flocks to different pastures, so they won't over graze. But the sheep are all mixed together in the pen. How do you now which sheep are whose?

Jesus said, "*The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*" A shepherd knows their sheep: their markers, their peculiarities, their individuality.

Leaders care about each individual.

Jesus also said, "*the sheep follow him because they know his voice.*"

Someone watching shepherds in Palestine, more than a century ago, saw this in action:  
*Each man went a little way beyond the ring of tents, and standing there uttered his special call. Instantly the whole mass of sheep and goats was in motion, and as the shepherds continued to call, the several flocks separated themselves, each streaming out of the camp in the direction of their respective guides, and in five minutes not a goat or sheep remained inside. Looking again shortly afterwards, the various flocks could be seen diverging to all points of the compass, each following its own shepherd.*<sup>2</sup>

What does that tell us about the true leader for God's people? When the people hear that voice, we know: "That's the one!" And we know our leader knows us. There is a personal knowledge between us. God's people need their true shepherd.

#### V

The argument among the crowd is about Jesus — Is he from God? Is he the Messiah? The King?. So I don't know about you, but I'm expecting Jesus to say "*Yes! I am the shepherd who cares for the people, and not the thief who steal them. Yes! I am the shepherd who knows my people and they know me, so they follow me and trust me. Yes, I am the leader for God's people.*" That's what I expect. And I think that's what Jesus is getting at. But that's not what he says first.

*"I am the gate!"* he says.

I did not get this. Not until I learned about a sheepfold gate.

At night, how do you stop the sheep from getting out and scattering, lost and endangered? How do you deter predators from sneaking in?

You could put up some sort of gate.

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<sup>2</sup> C. T. Wilson, Peasant Life in the Holy Land (1906), quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 615f.

Or better, you lie down in the gateway. You are the gate.<sup>3</sup>

It's "lying down on the job." But not to escape work. The shepherd gets right down, with the sheep. The shepherd lies on the ground, beside the sheep. The shepherd's own body protects the sheep, guards the sheep, encloses the sheep.

## VI

What sort of leader is this? What sort of messiah? What sort of king lies down with his sheep?

*The kings of the Gentiles rule over their subjects, and those in authority over them are called 'friends of the people.' . . . But I am among you as one who serves.<sup>4</sup>*  
(That's Jesus, talking about himself.)

*Though he was in the form of God,  
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.  
But he emptied himself  
by taking the form of a slave  
and by becoming like human beings.<sup>5</sup>*  
(That's the Apostle Paul, talking about Jesus.)

You can follow Jesus, with confidence, because he is the honest shepherd. His actions are trustworthy. There is no deceit in him.

You can follow Jesus, with assurance, because he knows you. He knows you! He calls you, personally, to follow him.

You can follow Jesus, with hope, because his words speak to you, his actions call to you, his voice echoes in your heart.<sup>6</sup>

You can follow Jesus, with love, because he is your shepherd, your leader, your king, who does not stand over you or away from you, but who comes down beside you: shielding you, protecting you, abiding with you.

That is the leadership of God, and the good news of Jesus the Messiah. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 22:25,27b (CEB)

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:6-7 (CEB)

<sup>6</sup> I was wondering what that means. What about those for whom Jesus' voice — his words and actions — do not resonate? I know that the human heart is also rebellious and resistant to God. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit does preparation work in us, making us receptive to Jesus. This is what John Wesley called "prevenient grace." Those who do not recognize Jesus voice, who continue to be resistant to the call of God . . . that for me is a troubling mystery.