

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – November 11, 2018

## [John 10:1-10](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com).)

(Note: This text is NOT one of the given readings for this particular week in the Revised Common Lectionary. It was selected thematically to accompany Jr. High Youth Sunday this week. So don't worry that the links below take you to materials for another calendar date – that is simply an aberration for this week! )

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### **Commentary on John 10:1-10** (From *Homiletics*; “Three Signs of an Abundant Life”, April 13, 2008)

Often biblical scholars seem to go looking for trouble where there is none. So it might seem with John 10:1-10. Here is a perfectly understandable selection, explaining Jesus' relationship with his followers. With our visions of Jesus carrying a lamb across his shoulders, it hardly seems necessary to spend much time worrying about scholarly readings. To the surprise of no one, nevertheless, there are questions which New Testament scholars raise even about such an appealing and well-loved reading. Perhaps to the surprise of many, one finds important life issues in the working out of answers to these questions.

First, scholars ask about the context of the text. What else is going on? What comes before and what happens afterward? Whom is Jesus addressing? In our case, the selection comes immediately on the close of chapter 9 with every indication the evangelist intended Jesus' discourse, begun in 9:40, to continue. Chapter 9 narrates the healing of the man born blind, his growing recognition of Jesus' personhood and the reactions of the Pharisees to the healing and his confession of faith in Jesus. At 9:40, we learn that the Pharisees were eavesdropping on the final dialogue between Jesus and the man now cured, and Jesus addresses them in 9:41, castigating them for saying that they are not blind. At 10:1, Jesus begins the Good Shepherd discourse which continues to 10:18. The next three verses, 19-21, provide a coda, including a reprise of the skepticism about Jesus' teaching, as in 9:41 and 10:6, ending with the response of “others” that demons could not cure blind people. The latter observation serves equally as a counter to the Pharisees and echoes the comments of the man born blind that “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (9:33). Hence, while the Good Shepherd pericope appears to start at 9:40 or 10:1, it is clear that the evangelist intended that it be read in conjunction with the story of the man born blind.

Scholars also argue about the genre of this pericope: Do verses 1-5 constitute a parable (a story carrying one particular moral), or an allegory (an extended metaphor in which all of the characters within the narrative have a 1:1 correspondence with others in the “real world”)? In his commentary on the gospel of John, Raymond Brown argues persuasively that there are two parables in verses 1-5: 1-3a, concerning access to the sheep through a doorkeeper, and 3b-5, concerning the shepherd. Jesus then interprets the two parables in allegorical fashion in verses 7-18.

Verses 7-10 describe what it means for Jesus to be the sheepgate, or door, interpreting verses 1-3a, while verses 11-18 provide an interpretation of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* vol. 1 [Anchor Bible Library, New York: Doubleday, 1966], 390-95). Over the years, there is a growing acknowledgment that this analysis is broadly correct.

In verses 7-10, Jesus explains that he is the “gate” or “door” providing both access to the sheep (v. 7) and egress and ingress for the sheep to pasture (v. 9). Modern Middle Eastern shepherds sometimes do use themselves as the door to a sheepfold, lying before the entrance to keep sheep in and predators out (E.F. Bishop, “The Door of the Sheep — John 10:7-9,” *Expository Times*, 71 (1959-60), 307-9, cited in Brown, *ibid.*, 386). In addition to such a pastoral image, the idea of a door through which one goes to encounter the divine reaches back into Homeric times while Ignatius of Antioch, writing within a few years of the production of the gospel of John, refers to Jesus as the “door of the Father” (*Letter to the Philadelphians*, 9.1) (C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edition [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978], 371-2.)

If Jesus is the “gate,” we conclude that the “sheep” are Jesus’ followers. Who is the “thief and bandit” who came before Jesus but the sheep did not follow? (v. 8). Are they the same as the thieves and bandits who will destroy the sheep! (vv. 8 and 10). Through the years there have been many responses, in part depending on whether the enemies are seen as enemies of Jesus in Jesus’ own time or whether they are seen as enemies of the Johannine community at the time of the writing of the gospel. Again, the consensus over the last 60 years or so has been to define the thieves and robbers as the religious authorities of Jesus’ day and whose descendants harassed the Johannine community. In a still-influential article from 60 years ago, Johannes Quasten wrote:

In verse 10 the robbers ... come ... only for their own advantage and not for that of the sheep. Transferred to the Pharisees, this means that they exercise their dominance, not in virtue of a divine mission or an inner call, but only to promote their own interests. If we consider with what pride and great contempt they looked down upon the “people,” how little they showed themselves to be faithful and diligent shepherds, then the expression “robbers and thieves” does not seem to be extraordinary, especially in connection with the other appellations Jesus bestows upon them. In Matthew 9:36 it is expressly stated of the people: “They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Johannes Quasten, “The Parable of the Good Shepherd: John 10:1-21,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 10 (January and April 1948), 1-12, 151-169, 159-60).

Twenty years later, J. Louis Martyn argued that the Johannine community’s attitude to “the Jews” reflected their expulsion from the synagogues, an event he argued was alluded to in John 9:22 and 34, providing yet another link between the Good Shepherd discourse and the man born blind (*History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 3rd ed, 2003]). Thus did the Jewish religious political authorities become identified with the thieves and bandits of John 10.

The gospel of John’s negative portrait of “the Jews” has proven problematic in a post-Holocaust world, and prompted scholarly and pastoral attention (see Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John: Text and Context* [Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2005], 20 fn. 1). Among the former is Adele Reinhartz (“To Catch a Thief: Jesus’ Opponents in John 10:1-5,” in *Self-Definition and Self-Discovery in Early Christianity: A Study in Changing Horizons*, David J. Hawkin and Tom J. Robinson, eds. [Lewiston N.Y.: The Edwin Mueller Press, 1990], 167-179), who focused particularly on Jesus’ opponents. She notes that the principal issue in verses 1-5 is one of authority: the thief has come for some nefarious purpose, but because the Thief has no legitimate authority, the sheep refuse to follow. She points out certain differences between the thief in verses 1-5 and his description later. In verses 8 and 10, the thief (a) has become “thieves,” plural, (b) has come, acted *and been rejected* before Jesus arrived, and (c) has come to steal, kill and destroy the sheep. The first observation may be dismissed as a change in verbal style with little impact on the story. The third observation, however, contrary to Quasten’s declaration 40 years earlier, is inconsistent with Jesus’ reason for antagonism toward the Pharisees elsewhere in John: Jesus castigates the Pharisees’ lack of faith (e.g., 8:37), not their intention to kill and destroy the sheep. The character who most nearly fits the description in verses 8 and 10 is the devil. The devil preceded Jesus on earth, probably caused the congenital blindness of the young man in chapter 9, and induced Judas to hand over Jesus to be destroyed (13:2). Reinhartz readily admits that the canonical gospels suggest considerable tension arose between Jesus and the authorities in his day, but reading with the presumption that the devil is a major actor against the young church helps us see Jesus in John 10:1-10 describing himself as the shepherd who keeps safe his flock from satanic powers.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org).

## Reflection Questions on John 10:1-10:

1. Does it not seem that Jesus' words in these verses are a pointed commentary about more than sheep or even himself? Who are these thieves and bandits of whom he speaks? What is the context of Jesus' words here? What about the context of John's writing?
2. Few of us are acquainted with the ways of sheep or the shepherding practices of first century Palestine. What might a more familiar metaphor be for modern readers be that conveys a similar meaning?
3. What does abundant life look like for you? How does your faith contribute (or not) to the living or the pursuit of such a life?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?**