

# Bandits and Thieves

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The bad guy or the criminal is an important part of a mystery story. Often times figuring out who the criminal is requires our sleuths to sort through several suspects before they arrive at the final conclusion. There are major bad guys like Moriarty in the Sherlock Holmes series, and minor bad guys, but without someone committing the crime, there is no mystery for our sleuth to solve.

If you have a favorite fictional criminal or bad guy, share in the comments below.

When we read John 10:1-10 on its own it seems a little jarring. Jesus starts the conversation talking about bandits and thieves. Anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate but climbs in another way is a thief and a bandit.

But if we remember to look at the chapter just before this, we realize that Jesus has just healed the man born blind. And while some religious leaders were convinced that this man and/or his parents must have sinned, must have been defective in some way, must have been unworthy to be in God's flock, Jesus healed this man and pointed to God's glory not this man's sin.

So it's in this context that Jesus starts the discussion in John 10.

Bandits and thieves are talked about three times in this short 10 verse passage: thieves and bandits don't come in through the gate but sneak in some other way. Sheep don't know the voice of bandits and thieves, so they don't listen to them, and thieves come to steal kill and destroy.

If this passage leaves us a little confused, we're in good company. Even those who were there with Jesus had a hard time understanding what he was talking about. But this passage is an important mystery to lean into and puzzle through. Through out the season of Easter we're talking about the mysteries of the resurrection. For ancient Christians, these fifty days between Easter and Pentecost were a time for reflecting on the mysteries of faith, and looking for God's presence in our ordinary lives. So it's a worthwhile to take some time to look at this passage and wonder where God is in this passage and what it has to do with our lives.

Part of what makes this passage so confusing is that Jesus refers to himself as the shepherd, but also the gate. Then there's the contrast with the bandits and thieves, and you throw in a gatekeeper (that Jesus never really identifies) and you've got the recipe for a confusing parable.

I see three pieces of good news for us in this passage, and one invitation.

- 1- Gathering us into beloved community
- 2- Leading us out into the world
- 3- Giving us abundant life

For the man born blind, being excluded, shamed and dishonored was the story of his life. The assumption was that he was more of a sinner than the average person for God to have cursed him like that. Even after he is healed, and should have therefore been restored to the community the people who despised him drove him out of the community.

Jesus' response then is powerful. Whether you are blind, or can see, you matter to God, come to me and I will welcome you through the gate of my sheep pen and you will be a part of the flock. You belong, you are loved, you are important. Come and be a part of my flock, for I am the good shepherd.

Having the shelter of the sheep pen is good news. Finding comfort and shelter and protection, a community of belonging is good news. If you have felt driven out by bandits and thieves in your life, I want to tell you that there is a place for you in Jesus' flock, you don't have to be healed before you come. You don't have to fit in. There is a place for you.

But the sheep pen is not the only place of good news. Because the sheep need to leave the pen, there are places to frolic and run and play, there is grass and clover to eat, there are fields to fertilize.

We too are welcomed into God's community, but there is a wide world of joys and hurts that need the presence of the shepherd and his sheep. But the good news is that Jesus leads us out into the world. Earlier this week I saw a family of geese at the park. There were new goslings, and they were so cute and little, and they were leaving the nest.

I'm sure there are times when like goslings we feel safest in the nest, but we need to practice swimming, and feeding and walking. So one parent led the way out, and the other parent followed the goslings from behind. God calls us out of the nest, out of the sheep pen, because there are things we need to do, but God goes with us. Leading us and being our rear guard. We cannot stay in the nest forever, but we can continue to return to the sheep pen.

The third piece of good news that I see in this passage, when we talk about looking for God in the ordinariness of life, is that Jesus in verse 10 tells us that he has come to give us life and life more abundant and more remarkable; he's come to give us a more alive life.

So there is so much good news in this passage, but as I read this passage with the filter of our theme for this season, looking for God's presence in the midst of ordinary life, I was struck by Jesus' words in verses three and four, about his sheep knowing his voice.

We hear a lot of voices. There are voices on tv, voices on the radio and in podcasts. Voices of friends, family and co-workers echo in our minds. We have our own internal voice that is

shaped largely by our childhood experiences. Most of us have a sharp inner critic who wants to steal, kill, and destroy like the bandits and thieves in this passage. But can we listen for the voice of the good shepherd? The voice that gives us life?

There are lots of resources for hearing God's voice out there, but here are a few that I have found helpful.

- 1- Being familiar with Jesus' voice in the scriptures, helps me to recognize his voice in my heart and my mind. After these weeks of stay at home and daily 2:00 press briefings, I'm familiar for example with Governor Walz' voice, I know that it's him speaking as soon as I hear him start to speak. In the same way, the more time that I spend "listening to Jesus," in scripture and prayer, the more familiar I am with his voice in my heart and my spirit.
- 2- Take time to slow down. Centering prayer, singing hymns, lighting a candle, using a labyrinth like Erin has taught us to make, these are ways that you can slow down the other voices in you heart and mind enough to make it possible to hear God's voice.
- 3- Asking myself – is this voice bringing me life more abundantly, or is this voice here to steal, kill and destroy? At different times the same "content" can be the voice of the thief, or the voice of the shepherd. When I have poured myself out and have done my best, the voice of the thief might say, "that's not enough, you should do more, what a failure." At other points, when I've phoned it in, or haven't dared to live a big enough life, the voice of the shepherd may say, "I have called you to life more abundantly, you can do so much more, I'm with you, let's keep going." Asking myself, is this leading to destruction and despair, or life more abundant and hope helps me to discern whether the voice I'm hearing is the voice of a loving shepherd, or bandit and a thief.

So, what helps you hear the voice of the shepherd? What helps you ignore the voice of the bandit and the thief? If you have ideas or things that have helped you to listen to the voice of God please share them below.