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May 11, 2019

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

[May 12, 2019](#)

Acts 13:14, 43-52

Psalms 100

Revelations 7:9, 14b-17

John 10:27-30

The Fourth Sunday of Easter always celebrates Christ as the Good Shepherd. This year, our readings focus more on the sheep than on the shepherd. In spite of the comforting image of Christ as Shepherd, today's Scriptures indicate that hearing the voice of the Shepherd requires discernment, and that his followers can expect to receive the same treatment as he did.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles is more contemporary than we might expect as it reflects on how to discern God's ongoing action in history. Paul appeared as a foreign missionary who has left Jerusalem and the comforts of his home culture with its familiar, all-pervasive religious atmosphere.

He was moving among his fellow Jews and their Gentile neighbors in Greek territory where one can find every variety of religious experience. The Jewish minority in that population had to be strong and stubborn to maintain their faith while surrounded by so many alternatives. They had every reason to be proud of their fidelity.

Then along comes Paul, retelling their sacred history to culminate in Jesus of Nazareth, presented as God's anointed one. Not only that, but Paul is offering his version of the faith to their pagan neighbors as if they could join equally with the chosen people in this new movement.

That had to be astounding to most of them, and to many it came off as downright heretical. Those latter people, staunchly faithful to their tradition, came to the conclusion that Paul was nothing more than an apostate Pharisee making the blasphemous claim that an executed criminal was the Messiah.

The Jews' rejection of the message left Paul deeply grieved. He was convinced that God had commissioned him to preach this Gospel to his own people and to the world. While he explained his anguish in detail in his letter to the Romans, in this story he simply warned the Jews that by disdaining his message they were refusing the offer of eternal life.

While some who rejected Paul may have been caught up in trying to preserve their status or privilege, others were undoubtedly sincere, striving to remain faithful to their tradition. Whether for motives of self-interest or conscience, they agreed to persecute and deport Paul and Barnabas.

So far, this story demonstrates that belonging to Christ, following the Good Shepherd, will often bring persecution and cause confusion.

The Jews who heard Paul faced a difficult dilemma: How could they discern if the new teaching they were hearing was of God? Unfortunately, Luke doesn't tell us what motivated people to reject Paul's message. Paul had carefully explained Jesus' life and mission in terms his fellow Jews would understand.



(Mark Bartholomew)

He began by urging them to "remain faithful to the grace of God" and went on to remind them that God had always been active in their history, not just for their sake, but so that they could be a light to the Gentiles. The memory of Abraham and Moses and the prophets had every possibility of helping them see that Jesus fit and fulfilled the pattern of God's messengers. But some part of Paul's message was too much for them, just as Jesus' message had been too much for some of his Israelite contemporaries.

Perhaps their problem was what Pope Francis calls the "unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 22). The message Paul preached called for openness to the new. It called for metanoia, the conversion that reorients lives. Metanoia always starts with confusion: the uncomfortable feeling that my truth may not be completely right.

For the Jews who rejected Paul, it may have seemed easier to reject a new insight than to discern whether it was of God. In order to allow our religious convictions to grow, we must be convinced that God is bigger than our theology or spirituality.

As Francis said in his letter to the U.S. bishops in January, "At times of great confusion and uncertainty, we need ... to free our hearts of compromises and false certainties, in order to hear what the Lord asks of us."

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This week's readings remind us that following the Good Shepherd is often neither easy nor clear. The history of Israel and the early church reminds us that God continually calls us to newness, to that which is greater than our expectations. Francis warns us that we must hold lightly to our certainties if we desire to hear the voice of the Shepherd today.

The one thing of which we can be sure is that the Shepherd is always trying to lead us beyond where we are into greater, broader, deeper love — and that will often be unruly, confusing and new.

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Editor's note: *This Sunday Scripture commentary was originally published in [Celebration](#), a comprehensive pastoral resource. Sign up to receive [weekly Scripture for Life emails](#).*

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