A Season of Invitations

During this season of Easter many of our readings are found lifted up each year and this Sunday is known as Shepherd’s Sunday with many of the reading those with much beloved images and metaphors. The metaphor and image of God as shepherd begins early in the Hebrew Scriptures but does certainly not end there. Our psalm for today is one of the most beloved through Christian faith communities. The opening verse “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want is a lifeline of comfort and strength during those rocky times which happen in all lives. That image of guidance through darkness, provision of a table by still waters speaks universally. I is known beyond the bounds of the churched community and a source of strength even there. When reading a commentary on the Epistle reading from 1st Peter I found a commentary which seemed related to the gospel reading from John 10:1-10. In it the author referred to a book by Brian McLaren a noted theologian titled *Finding Our Way Again*. Within that book, McLaren cited an interview that he had with author Peter Senge at a convocation of clergy. During that interview, Senge wondered aloud about the reason that texts on spirituality, especially those on Buddhism are one of the fasting growing sections within the publishing industry today, second only to get-rich-quick manuals. As the discussion continued Senge offered his opinion on the issue: People are attracted to Buddhism because it presents itself as a way of life, while Christians often presents Christianity as a system of belief. This is a point we need to think about as those called to invite others to come near our Lord. It often appears that Christianity has become so enamored with its own abstractions—its commitments to proper doctrine for example, or to “what the Bible says”—it has come quite close to convincing itself that intellectual assent to first principles is really what the faith is all about. Right belief has become seen as the foundation of Christian salvation. Surveys of both Christian adults and teenagers caused the researchers to conclude that most are operating with a vague sort of Moral Therapeutic Deism: be nice, don’t do bad, for a remote deity wants you to be happy and feel good about yourself. Our readings from Acts can quickly abuse us of that idea about how the good news was received by those first believer. Although I began with the statement about how widely known and used is that 23rd Psalm, there are many passages in scripture and in the historical record of Christianity that tell us there was a lot more going on in the communities which received the good news. Within the Epistles we have a record of how their understanding of what the good news meant was that it did indeed lead to a marked change in their lives—a transformation which widely separated them from the culture and mores of their surroundings. In today’s reading from Acts we read how that early community’s faith separated them from their former ways. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to fellowship and prayers, to tending to all the members of their growing fellowship. Their goal was to provide for all so that no one had unfulfilled needs. The joined in a community with a style of living that prized intellectual vibrancy…accepting of changes in previous understanding of their God…economic generosity and communal caring. They sought to answer and pursue the goal Jesus stated in John:10-10. “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.” Much of the focus found in the Epistles is devoted to describing that changed life and the calls it made upon those who sought to “follow the Way” which was how those first believers thought of themselves. When we examine American culture today the attributes we find encourage avarice, envies, accumulation of possessions and greed. Despite the claim of many that America is Christian…does the data support people living according to the Biblical description of the Way? Early believes created and shaped communities with mutual commitment…a commitment described with the Greek word Koinonia which lifted the goal of building a shared existential reality and an anticipatory future…we still speak of that goal when we pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. But for many of us the striving for that reign to be here has been deemed too idealistic and have instead envision only that reign happening in either the distant future or only at the end of times. Sometimes we find it hard to see that God isn’t just present when God’s adopted sons and daughters gather for worship. God is also among God’s people when we gather in smaller groups and not just for purposes we define as worship or service…God is present and seeking us to listen for his voice as he speaks and calls his flocks to draw nearer and work for that goal Jesus stated in that last verse of today’s passage. This brings us to trying to decipher the metaphors and images within today’s reading from John’s gospel. Although most translation give the entire 10th chapter the title *Jesus the Good Shepherd*, that term is not found in the first 10 verses, but this is rarely noted. We often conflate this entire chapter to those which follow where Jesus describes the characteristics of what a Good Shepherd does. The latter half of today’s passage begins that thought as he describes the actions of some who have come before him as leaders of God’s people. In the context of John’s narrative this follows the story of the blind man whom Jesus healed and returned to that “life abundant” of being sighted while the religious leaders question and finally expelled him from the community. “All who came before me are thieves and bandits” says Jesus of those who have responded this way to his healing and restoration activities. The passage however began with a different description of how a shepherd is known by the flock. The passage describes the safety of being within the shepherd’s sheepfold, an enclosure which protects them…but also focus on something we often miss…the sheepfold’s gate is the shepherd…and the described function of the “gate” is to lead the sheep out. As this extended metaphor plays out Jesus is both shepherd and gate….as shepherd he is the one who is known and trusted by those who belong to him…his sheep. Because they know and trust, they can hear his voice and can follow where he leads. Because he is the gate itself, the image for us becomes more difficult. We see the gate as a fixture which remains in place, the solid protection given for those within the sheepfold. Yet in this passage Jesus clearly expect those who know and trust him to follow him out, beyond the enclosure…to find pasture and live their life abundantly. In this passage Jesus also warns about those whose voices also call to the sheep…those thieves and bandits which come only to still and kill and destroy while he seeks to lead to an abundant life. God always seeks to draw people into life, into joy. The well-being of the sheep whom make up the flock are always God’s concern. In this passage the sheep are not totally dumb…they hear, follow and will flee false shepherds…and are able to know whom to trust. There the shepherd brings the sheep out of the fold and then goes before them…leading them and being present with them. They are never abandoned. The way to the pasture…life…comes through following Jesus. The central characteristic of this message is about finding and knowing who and what is trustworthy so that following will indeed lead to that life abundant. This description of sheep was derived from someone who grew up on a ranch raising sheep and he found these statements helpful. We resemble sheep in many ways…they are filthy animals, generally covered in mud and their own waste and often have their wool cleaned before shearing is done. They rarely stay cute, cuddly and calming as they grow from lamb to adult. He affirmed that sheep are either suicidal or stupid and maybe both.

He recalled countless stories that involve sheep putting themselves in unnecessary danger much of which could often be avoided by doing something simple like turning around. He also noted that sheep are hard wired to follow the sheep in front of them. They do know the voice of the shepherd, but will only sometimes follow it. The shepherd can know and recognize individual sheep, but this process takes time on both sides so that they trust only their shepherd. As I listed those “sheep” characteristics…don’t some of them seem apt our human beings and their behaviors….This is a season when many of receive invitations to family and community gatherings…perhaps as we revisit this familiar passage from John’s gospel we can discern truths about ourselves and our shepherd, Jesus Christ. He is indeed the Good Shepherd who came to bring us abundant life here and now, restoring community and leading us out into the world to witness to God’s presence with and among us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.