

Welcome

One of my favorite spooky movies is a Michael Keaton movie called WHITE NOISE. It features a man who's lost his wife, and in the midst of his grief turns to Electronic Voice Phenomenon (EVP) to try to contact her ghost.

EVP is a real thing ghost hunters do, where they record static on a TV or radio station, and then play it back to listen for messages left by spirits.

As you can imagine, this doesn't go well. Part of it is the inherent silliness of EVP itself. Our brains are meaning-making machines; we've evolved to find patterns. And if there aren't patterns, we'll *make* them. So when we're listening to a bunch of static, hour after hour, we're going to start hearing voices, messages in this otherwise random noise.

But part of it is something the movie makes into a cautionary tale: let's assume, for the sake of the argument (or, in this case, the spooky movie), there *is* a message in the static. How do you know who's sending the message? How do you know whether they're good or bad? How do you know whether they want to help or harm you?

This isn't actually a big issue in the movie - it's pretty clear that whatever is sending the messages is bad (spooky movie, remember). But it's a fascinating problem in our world, isn't it? After all, we're inundated with messaging, all of it promising to make our lives better. Make us thinner, more attractive, safer, wealthier, holier.

We know that not all of those messages are actually designed with our well-being in mind. That's true of advertising, certainly. Don Draper doesn't care if his product actually makes you wealthier, slimmer or more attractive, as long as you buy it.

But it's true of religious messaging, too. We live in a time when we are surrounded by spiritual leaders who have manipulated those who follow them for power, wealth or even as objects of physical pleasure.

And even if our religious leaders don't turn out to be con-men or predators, there's still a lot of toxic theology out there, messaging that - even though it comes from pulpits and pastors - is contrary to the liberating message of God's love for us.

So... how do we know the difference?

Today, we're going to revisit a time in Jesus' ministry when he faced this very issue: he was accused of being a false teacher by religious authorities. And he gave them a clear guide to what a leader who is truly worthy of our trust looks like.

A trustworthy leader is someone who puts the good of their people above their own. A good leader is one who, like Jesus, is willing to lay down his life for his people.

With that in mind, let's begin by celebrating Jesus' love for us!

Message

We're in the wake of Easter, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. Here at Catalyst, we celebrate the resurrection not as a cool thing that happened that one time, but as an ongoing reality in which we all get to participate. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of a new creation, a new reality that is coming into being all around us. We can learn to see this new reality breaking through the old through Jesus himself. By giving us the Holy Spirit to live within and among us, Jesus enables us to see and participate in God's new world.

That's why our series is called DECODER RING. Jesus enables us to discern what would otherwise be hidden to us.

Weeks 2-3 Summary

Today, we're exploring the reality of living in a world saturated in perspectives. How do we know which leader to follow? Who is the most trustworthy? How do we know who really has our best interests at heart?

That's difficult to discern in realms like politics - after all, not every politician flies to Cancun during an ice storm. But I think it might be even trickier in the religious realm. It's so easy to equate big buildings and packed pews with religious blessing. But is that really the case? How can we tell if this religious leader or that is worth following?

Take someone like Martin Luther King, Jr., today almost universally lauded as a champion of justice and equality. The last Gallup poll taken during his lifetime saw 63% of Americans rating him 'unfavorable' - and that includes 39%, almost two in five, who gave him the lowest possible rating.

We all like to think today that we'd be pro-MLK. But the numbers speak otherwise.

So... how do we know? Is it possible not to wait for history to judge, but rather to discern who is aligned with Jesus in the here and now?

Turn with us to [Ezekiel 34](#).

We're going to be in [John 10](#) today, but before we turn there, let's hop back to [Ezekiel 34](#).

You might remember Sonya's last sermon before Easter, when she introduced us to Jesus' encounter with the man born blind. Jesus encounters a man born blind, and heals him. By the time the man can see, Jesus is nowhere to be found. And perhaps the most surprising part of the story is that, rather than being excited, everyone is scandalized.

It turns out that Jesus' work is a threat to the powers of the day, of their ability to control who's in and out.

It's in response to their behavior toward the man he healed that Jesus launches into his famous Good Shepherd parables.

When he frames himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus is drawing on one of Ezekiel's most famous passages, where God criticizes the leaders of God's people as evil shepherds. Let's read, and I think you'll see where Jesus is going with his ideas:

Then this message came to me from the Lord: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign Lord: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them. -- Ezekiel 34:1–6 (NLT)

What makes these religious and political leaders bad shepherds is that they - ahem - fleece their flocks for their own benefit. It's easy to think of politicians who take lobby dollars and vote against the wishes and interests of their constituents, or prosperity preachers spending tithe money on private jets while their people live paycheck to paycheck.

But Ezekiel's beef is deeper: they're not caring for the weak and vulnerable. They don't spend time going after those who have fallen away. And as a result, they're vulnerable to those who truly want to do them harm.

But God's not finished. The prophet goes on to imagine a day when God will come among the people as the true, good shepherd they need:

"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live. Yes, I will give them good pastureland

on the high hills of Israel. There they will lie down in pleasant places and feed in the lush pastures of the hills. I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign Lord. I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice! -- Ezekiel 34:11–16 (NLT)

This is the imagery Jesus reached for when he stood before the man he had healed, the man the religious leaders rejected and demonized. Jesus looked at them and said, “Anyone who would treat this man the way you do cannot claim to represent God.”

Jesus gives us peace. Jesus brings us home. Jesus bandages our wounds and strengthens our weakness.

Song

Okay, now let's read what Jesus says about himself.

Turn with us to [John 10](#).

Sheep were one of the stable livestock animals of Jesus' world. That means that, even if you didn't own sheep, you knew all about them - sort of how we think of cats and dogs today.

Sheep are very loyal. They learn voice of their shepherd and they straight up won't follow someone they don't know. They're pack creatures (flock creatures?). They're communal. They stick together for the most part.

And in Jesus' time, there were a few different ways people cared for sheep. In small villages, most people only owned a few sheep. They would often keep all the sheep together in a single fold, and hire one or two shepherds to protect them.

In cities, folds might have tall walls, to keep out thieves. Alternatively, we have records of some shepherds sleeping across the opening in the fold, so that anyone who wanted to come for the sheep had to get past the shepherd first.

I share all of these different images because we don't know exactly how Jesus wanted us to take these words. In fact, Jesus may have used this imagery precisely because we can hear it a few different ways. What *does* matter is that we remember this is in context of the rejection the formerly blind man faced at the hands of the very people who should have been celebrating God's work in his life.

So as we read, listen to what Jesus is saying, and allow yourself to have fun with the imagery:

“I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don’t know his voice.” -- John 10:1–5 (NLT)

If you were with us on Easter, you may also remember a little callback John does - Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus (she thinks he’s the gardener). It’s not until he calls her by name that she recognizes his voice, proving that Mary is one of Jesus’ flock. Fun, huh?

Now, if you still find all this sheep stuff a little confusing, don’t worry - so did the other people present, including those religious leaders. So Jesus clarifies:

Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn’t understand what he meant, so he explained it to them: “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. -- John 10:6–10 (NLT)

Jesus tells us that determining who we should follow doesn’t take a code cracker. Are the leaders pointing us to life and wholeness? Or are they teaching us to be afraid while robbing us blind?

Is the vision of life they offer us one that is really for everyone? Or do they exploit the vulnerable and further trod on the oppressed?

When someone like the man born blind comes among them as a testimony to God’s power and presence, how do they respond?

Communion + Examen

Jesus shows us he’s our faithful shepherd by laying down his life for us.

Who in my life in the last week has shown care and concern for me that reminds me of Jesus?

How have I shown a Jesus-like care and concern for others in my life?

To whom might God be calling me to pay attention in this next week?

What does it look like for me to trust a Jesus-like leader in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing

I hope you ask those questions even of me. No leader is perfect