

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 15, 2026

The Voice of the Shepherd

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Grace and peace to you from the One who is already here, already reaching toward us, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A lot of us learned to read the Bible the same way we read a textbook: finish chapter nine, close the cover, then sometime later start something new in chapter ten. But John's Gospel doesn't work like that. John 10 isn't Jesus changing the subject. It's Jesus interpreting what has just happened the chapter before.

In John 9, a man born blind is healed. And then, almost immediately, he's interrogated, shamed, and expelled. The religious authorities don't rejoice that a human being has been restored. They weaponize theology. They turn the miracle into a courtroom. And when the man refuses to deny what happened to him or play into their narrative, they drive him out.

And it's right then, right on the heels of that expulsion, that Jesus begins speaking about sheep, thieves, robbers, and a shepherd who calls his own by name. Here's the driving truth today: the man born blind is the prototype of the sheep. He hears the Shepherd's voice, he is driven out by false shepherds, and he is welcomed into a new fold.

Both 1 Samuel 16 and John 9 expose the same problem: human beings are terrible at seeing what truly matters. Samuel is sent to Bethlehem. God tells him, "I have provided for myself a king." Samuel sees Eliab, the tall, strong, impressive older brother, and Samuel thinks, "Surely this is the one." Surely God's anointed looks like what power *usually* looks like.

But God interrupts Samuel's assumptions with a line that levels every human hierarchy: "The Lord does not see as mortals see... they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." God's gaze doesn't follow our ranking systems. These days, we might size someone up by their résumé, their social media following, the prestige of their college, how put-together they look at

meetings, or even how many likes their latest post received. But God doesn't organize human worth by height, health, beauty, productivity, status, influence, or reputation. God sees differently. God sees deeper.

And John 9 gives us the same story, only starker. The disciples see the blind man and immediately ask a question that sounds religious but is actually cruel: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Let that question linger for a moment. Sit with it. Hear how easily it slips from curiosity to condemnation. Imagine being the subject of this conversation! Feel the weight of being the one the crowd points to, pressed under their suspicion. The question the disciples are asking is this: Who do we get to blame? What's the moral/theological explanation for his suffering?

The Pharisees do something similar, just with more power. They look at his condition and assume he is "born entirely in sins." They can't imagine that God's work might show up in someone they've already labeled defective, questionable, or cursed.

But Jesus, Jesus **sees** him. Not as a problem to solve. Not as an argument to win. Not as a sinner to shame. Jesus sees him as a person. Jesus sees him as a "canvas," a place where the glory of God will be revealed.

The true Shepherd recognizes his sheep, even when the religious establishment refuses to see them. And if we're honest, we still do this. We still assume Eliab is the kingly one. We still "know" who matters and who doesn't. We still confuse polish with calling, certainty with holiness, respectability with righteousness. Lent exposes that blindness. And the first mercy God gives us is to admit we don't see clearly.

Ephesians says, "Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light... Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." That's poetic, until you realize John 9 is that poem in flesh and blood. The man's healing is a literal passage from darkness to light. But it's more than vision in his eyes. It's illumination in his soul. Because the more the authorities press him, the clearer he sees.

At first he says, “The **man** called Jesus...” Then: “He is a **prophet**.” Then, as the pressure rises, “If this **man** were not **from God**, he could do nothing.” And finally, when Jesus finds him: “**Lord**, I believe.” And he worships.

The man’s eyes open, he steps into the light of Christ, but paradoxically, that light immediately leads him into what Psalm 23 calls the “darkest valley.” His neighbors are unsure if he’s even the same person. His parents are terrified and refuse to stand with him. The leaders interrogate him, insult him, and expel him.

Imagine the loneliness pressing in after such a joyful healing, the ache of abandonment, the sting of doubt whispering, “what if this new life is more of the same, more of being an outsider?” Fear swirls. Will anyone stand with me now? Is it safer to stay silent? All the joy of sight comes mingled with grief, isolation, and uncertainty. If you’ve ever lost your footing after something good, or wondered if courage is worth the cost, you already know what it feels like to walk in this man’s shoes.

And in that world, being cast out of the synagogue isn’t just hurt feelings. It’s a social death. The synagogue wasn’t just a place for a one-hour Sabbath service; it was the town hall, the economic hub, and the center of the community’s identity. Being expelled meant you couldn’t trade, you couldn’t marry, and your family would likely distance themselves in order to survive. Being expelled meant losing community, protection, and economic life. It’s being made untouchable.

This reveals one of the hardest truths in following the Way of Christ: sometimes when Christ shines on you, it doesn’t immediately make life easier. Sometimes the light exposes what the darkness depends on: control, fear, scapegoating, and the fragile power of “respectable religion.” The healed man becomes a threat simply because he tells the truth: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” The valley isn’t proof that the Shepherd is absent. Sometimes the valley is where the Shepherd proves who he is.

In the history of the Ancient Levant, God had always warned his people about 'false shepherds. The prophet Ezekiel specifically condemns leaders who feed themselves rather than the flock, those who do not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strayed, or seek the lost. Instead, they rule with force

and harshness, and the sheep are scattered (Ezekiel 34). The Pharisees knew this scripture, yet they were living it out by protecting their institution over the sheep.

That's the deeper issue in John 9. The Pharisees are not protecting the man. They are protecting the institution, protecting their interpretation, protecting their authority. And when the man's story doesn't fit their system, they choose the system over the sheep.

So they drive him out. But here is the gospel pivot: the expulsion is not the end of his story, because Jesus goes looking for him. John 9:35 is one of the most tender verses in Scripture: "Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him..." When he found him.

The Shepherd doesn't just heal and move on. The Shepherd does not abandon the sheep to the consequences of other people's cruelty. The Shepherd hears. The Shepherd seeks. The Shepherd finds.

And this is where we see that John 10 isn't a new section of the narrative, it's a direct interpretation: "The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." "I know my own and my own know me." "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The false shepherds cast the blind man out of their fold. They cast him out to the wolves. And then the true Shepherd welcomes him into a **new** fold.

Psalm 23 says it like this: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Notice, not after the enemies are gone. Not after everything calms down. Not once the Pharisees apologize. Right there, while the hostility still hangs in the air, God sets a table.

Then Psalm 23 continues: "You anoint my head with oil." That anointing echoes our first reading. David, the overlooked shepherd boy, is anointed while his older brothers watch. God exalts the one human systems bypass or ignore.

And in John 9, the man born blind is, in a sense, anointed too. Not with Samuel's oil, but with a new belonging, a new fold. He is welcomed into the presence of the Lord. He confesses faith. He worships. This is what the Shepherd does: he doesn't just rescue you from danger; he restores your dignity in the very place others tried

to erase it. He brings you into a new fold, even in the presence of wolves and false shepherds.

So we know what marks the Shepherd, but what marks the sheep in John 10? Not their strength. Not their moral perfection. Not their social acceptance. Not whether they've stayed safely inside the religious gate. Not their spiritual record, not their knowledge, not even their courage. The mark is this: "They know his voice."

Not achievement, not approval, not background, not belonging to the right crowd. Not any of the things we are told should make us confident and secure. They know his voice. That alone is the entryway to true belonging, the surprising qualifier of what it means to be in the flock of the Good Shepherd.

And that's why the man born blind is the prototype. When he was healed, he hadn't even seen Jesus yet. He heard him. He trusted the voice that told him, "Go, wash." Later, when Jesus finds him, he recognizes the One who saved him, not first by sight, but by encounter, by truth, by the sound of mercy. That's our call in Lent: to awaken to the light, to trust the Shepherd in the valley, and to tune our ears to the true voice over all the false ones.

Just like the blind man in John 9, we live in a noisy world full of competing voices. We are constantly surrounded by the "false shepherds" of our culture, voices that judge us by outward appearance, like Samuel almost did, voices that define us by our past mistakes, and voices that threaten to cast us out if we don't fit their mold. But the Good Shepherd is standing outside the gate, calling your name.

So I want to challenge you with three concrete steps this week, three ways to live as "children of light" and "sheep" who know their Shepherd's voice:

First: Audit your vision. Ask yourself: Who have I been spiritually blind to? Who have I reduced to a label? Who have I dismissed as "not worth the trouble"? And yes, where have I judged myself by my appearance, my failures, my productivity, my pain? This week, pray: "Lord, give me your eyes. Help me see hearts, not hierarchies. Help me see all people as your beloved."

Second: Wake up the sleeper. Ephesians says, "Awake, O sleeper... and Christ will shine on you." Identify one area of darkness or complacency where you've fallen asleep: an old resentment, a numbing habit, a broken relationship you keep

avoiding, a cynicism you call “realism.” Take one concrete step: a confession, a phone call, a changed routine, an honest prayer. Not to prove yourself, but to step into the light where Christ heals.

Third: Tune your ear. The sheep recognize the Shepherd’s voice because they spend time with him. You cannot recognize a voice you never listen to. Commit to ten minutes of complete, unplugged silence each morning this week. Before the phone, before the news, before the anxious voices of the day. Sit still and pray, “Good Shepherd, speak first.” And let the Shepherd remind you: even in the valley, even with enemies all around, a table is already prepared for you.

Beloved, the false shepherds will always be loud. But the Shepherd’s voice is faithful. He calls his own by name. He leads them out. He finds the cast-out. He prepares a table. He anoints the head. He brings us into a new fold.

May Christ shine on you. May you hear his voice. And may you follow. Amen.