

TO FOLLOW THE LIGHT — THREE IMAGES OF JESUS

Images of Jesus: Shepherd

John 10:2-5, 10-15

April 26, 2026

When was the last time you felt truly known? Not tracked or targeted. *Known*. By name.

We are overwhelmed by voices. Some summon. Some sort. Some sell. They all know your zip code. They know your browsing history. They know what you fear and what you want. Google, "How to fold a fitted sheet?" and an ad will appear for luxury Egyptian cotton hammocks. They can recognize the pattern, but they do not know the person.

You know that not every voice deserves your life. But how do you decide which voice to follow when so many sound convincing? They promise efficiency or ease, productivity or popularity, a quick fix for whatever it is that ails you.

How to choose? Start with the ache behind the deafening noise, the ache in your heart: the need to be known. To be led and not used. To be loved and not left. To be called by name.

God's answer is a shepherd. He knows his sheep by name. He stands between the flock and the wolf. He leads by the gentle sound of a familiar voice. He lays down his life for the lambs.

And that's our story, the story that answers all the other stories, the heart of everything we say about God. He knows his own. He knows the one who limps along. He knows the one who is easily startled and the one who wanders a little too close to danger. The one who is too cautious to venture out.

The shepherd knows us and will not stand at a safe distance and call the sheep to face what he will not bear. He moves toward the wolf. He places himself between the flock and what would devour it. He does so freely. *No one takes my life from me, he says. I lay it down.*

The shepherd's is not the only voice in the text. There is another voice, another character. It belongs to the hired hand. He does not appear monstrous, and that's what makes him dangerous. He's competent. He's reasonable. He's attentive—until the cost becomes clear. Then he runs. Because the flock was never his life. He might manage the sheep, but he does not love them, not enough to lose anything for them.

This is the line that Jesus draws. There is a shepherd, and there are hired hands. The test is not the volume of their voice, or the eloquence of their rhetoric, or the soaring promises made from the safety of distance. The test is the wolf. When danger is present, where do they stand?

The shepherd steps up. The hired hand ducks and runs. The difference here is not subtle, nor does Jesus make it subtle. It is also not confined to the fields of ancient lands. Jesus tells this story. Jesus makes this distinction. And so, we can safely assume that it is about us.

The voices we encounter have immense power over us. The power to heal us. Power to harm us. Far greater power than sticks and stones that break our bones. The Book of James calls the tongue a fire, a world of evil. And you know he is right. And so do I.

Way back when I was in fourth grade, my family moved to a new town in the middle of the school year—bad move! Not easy for an eight-year-old. Knowing that I was struggling a bit with the move, my parents arranged for me to go a few weeks early so that I could join the church basketball team at the start of the season. I loved basketball, then as now. Playing on my first real team was the one bright spot on our move.

So, one Saturday night, my father and I slept in sleeping bags on the empty floor of our rental home. We ate

powdered donuts from the gas station for breakfast the next day, and then I got dressed and headed to basketball practice. I was filled with excitement and anxiety. I knew that I would be the youngest player on the team, and I assumed based on my stature (then as now) that I would also be the smallest player on the team. After all, that team included middle-schoolers.

I was desperate to fit in. So, thinking they were my coolest clothes, I got up, and I put on an almost-new pair of jeans and headed to practice. The coach greeted me warmly and told me to go join the boys who were shooting around before practice.

And that's when the words were spoken. Not to me, but near me, close enough for me to hear the sound of their voices. As I walked by my new teammates, one boy said to another boy, "Jeans for basketball practice—now that's a new one." Then they both laughed out loud.

It was so small. It was barely a moment. And I truly don't think they meant to hurt me. And let's face it, blue jeans are an odd choice for basketball. But their voices landed like a verdict in my heart. *You don't belong here.*

There was a clock on the wall behind one of the baskets, and every time we ran that direction, I counted how many minutes were left until I could get back in my dad's car. For weeks I had a stomachache every time we got in the car to head to practice or a game. I'm relatively certain that neither of those two boys would remember that moment. And yet, thirty-five years later, as I tell you the story this morning, I can still feel the sting.

A single sentence. A moment of laughter. A sideways glance. Something in you changes.

Now, if you can, imagine voices like that repeated until they become your inner soundtrack. Voices that sort you, and rank you, and judge you based on likes and followers, streaks and stories, squads and shares. You develop the relentless need to be affirmed by a crowd you cannot control. Voices with no faces. And you don't just hear them. You start to become them. You join the chorus so you won't be left out or targeted.

Scripture names it plainly: what we follow we come to resemble. What we worship, we grow to reflect. It is not dramatic. It is slow. A series of small moments stacked one on top of the other until we are formed in ways we could not have imagined. Friends, if the voice you follow is fluent in contempt, contempt will begin to speak through you. If the voice you follow insists that every stranger is a threat, you will wake up one day and find you have made your world very, very small.

That's how formation works, and no one is exempt. So you must be very careful which voice you follow. Even those claiming to speak for the shepherd can lead us astray. They quote scripture but lead toward fear of neighbor, contempt for the vulnerable, resentment of the other, violence defended as divine right. But watch where they lead. Watch what happens when the wolf comes. Don't focus just on the words—watch the way.

The Shepherd says: *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.* Abundant life—for the whole flock.

Every voice that wants a piece of you must be tested, and the test is simple. Where does it *actually* lead? What kind of person does it tell you to be? When you look in the mirror, do you recognize yourself?

Look at these teenagers. They have grown up drowned in noise. Devices in their hands before the tools to discern their voices. They are what marketers call the target demo. Targeted. Think of that. Forces that keep them scrolling but will never give them peace surround them at every turn.

Today they do something very brave. They are here to declare that they know which voice to follow; they are here to tell you they belong to a story bigger than themselves. This is no small thing. In this climate, it is courage. A community of teenagers who have grown strong enough to choose the voice that knows their name and leads to life.

Confirms, this part is for you. In just a few moments, each one of you will be called by your name. One by one. Because that is how this Shepherd knows his sheep. Not as a group, but individuals. One by one.

And then, you'll walk out those doors. And they'll be after you from the minute you do. The voices that want your soul, and they will pursue you all your life.

And here's the trick. Some of them are going to sound brave, and some will sound clever. Some will offer you belonging or identity, success or security, certainty and confidence. And all you need to do is harden your heart. All you need to do is shrink smaller or grow meaner, or be less tender, tough enough for the real world. If you hear nothing else I say today, please hear this plea from your pastor: *do not give them your soul.*

The voice calling you today knows your name. Not your profile or your metrics. The name spoken at your baptism. The name spoken before you even knew yourself. Yes, there will be days when you cannot hear his voice. When the noise is louder. When the wolves are closer. When the hired hands are so persuasive. When you are tired, or you are angry, or you are far from home and ashamed to go back.

On those days, you should not try to remember the whole faith, the whole curriculum. Just remember this: *the same Shepherd who calls you by name today will still be speaking to you.* He will not stop speaking because you stop listening. He will not leave because you wander. He will not run when the wolf comes.

He will stay. He stays with the wounded, and the wandering, and the worried, and the overwhelmed. He stays with the hard questions, and the deep doubts, and the swirling chaos. He stays to give his life for your life. He offers himself to show you the way. Listen through the noise for the one voice your heart will always recognize.

And to the rest of us: you cannot outsource this. You cannot bless these confirmands and then build a church they won't recognize. You cannot call him Shepherd and follow the hired hands. We cannot sing of a Savior who laid down his life and not offer yours. If *you* hear nothing else today, please hear this plea from your pastor: *they are watching to see if you mean it.*

If the Shepherd is Lord, our church must look like him. The wolves are already waiting. They are in the hallway and in the group chat. In the mirror at midnight. The voices will never stop. They will tell you that you aren't good enough or that faith is a foolish dream.

The hired hands will scatter, and every promise they made to stay will be broken when times turn tough. But the Shepherd stands firm. Still calling. Not because of your worst moments or your best performances. Not by your data or your metrics.

By your name. The one that cannot be bought or sold or stolen. The one that even death cannot silence. He knows it. You know it.

And so, go among the wolves. Live as people unafraid of the noise. Live as people unashamed of the gospel. Live as people who know whose they are. Listen and don't ever forget it. You belong to God. Amen.