

## “Going Astray”

### Sermon – April 26, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

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“Slaves, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only those who are good and gentle but also those who are dishonest.” 1 Peter 2:18.

Our lectionary for the epistle lesson starts with the following verse, saying, “For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.”

Ephesians and Colossians have similar verses on slaves and masters. And these make us uncomfortable today. We may be able to rationalize why most of the 613 commandments in the Old Testament do not apply to us, but it is more difficult for things said in the New Testament.

It is particularly difficult for us here in the United States because of our history with slavery, which started in Jamestown, Virginia, in August 1619, was embedded in our Constitution, led to the War Between the States, and was revoked *de jure* with the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment.

But the 250 years of a culture that developed racism to justify enslaving Africans and their descendants continued, particularly in the South with Jim Crow laws that the North turned a blind eye to.

And 60 years after the Civil Rights Acts in the 1960s to address those injustices, we have government and so-called Christian leaders backed by a core group of Americans rolling back those protections.

They further are expanding those attitudes towards immigrants from Latin America because of their brown skin—even if they are U.S. citizens or Christians—while being accommodating to immigrants from South Africa—if they are white.

You may be thinking, “This sounds more like a diatribe than a sermon.” And you’re not entirely wrong. Because it is frustrating to live a life where you see so many advancements in society only for us to fall back to fear, hate, and prejudice not just in society but in our government.

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But that is the story of our faith and society from the beginning. In order to move forward, we need as a people to acknowledge our past and all its evils and repent as a people, including our government and religious leaders, as all the prophets in the Bible warned the leaders and the people of their time to do.

And repenting is more than saying, “I’m sorry.” It is changing systems, beliefs, and behaviors to at least rectify the injustices going forward, if not compensate for the past.

Today’s scripture passages point us to Christ and the pattern of his life as the pattern for ours, even in the face oppression and false leaders.

Too many Christians cherry pick Bible verses and bring their own ideas into the interpretation to bend the text to conform to their preconceived notions, personal opinions, and biases.

The goal we should have is to interpret the text based on the grammar, historical context, and syntax as to the author’s original intent.

In addition, we need to consider the text not only in the context of the book it appears, but also to the message overall of the Bible, which Jesus famously did by saying “love.” And not as a noun but an action verb.

Let’s consider then the interpretation of each of our three lectionary passages today, if abbreviatedly.

Today passage from Acts 2 immediately follows the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost and Peter’s sermon and the 3000 baptized that day. We now hear of this idyllic community of Christ followers who support each other mutually and are well-regarded by the people around them.

We know, however, subsequently in Acts, as well as from many of the epistles, that this model of community and fellowship is not sustained

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nor propagated elsewhere. Thus, it is easy to say, “Well, it didn’t happen elsewhere and it’s not practical anyway, so we can ignore it.”

Luke had a vision, though, of a Christ community where all members have their basic needs met; where there will be enough food for all and the basic needs of life will be available for all. However, just like the stories in Genesis, where the goodness given by God does not last, and the frailty of human existence breaks through paradise, soon this ideal community is marred by sin, in this case greed, power, and prejudice.

But for a moment, we have a glimpse of the new creation; a glimpse of the new birth given through the resurrection of Christ. So, even if our humanness gets in the way, shouldn’t we at least strive for this ideal?

The virtues of justice, worship, and mutuality are not accomplishments of extraordinary folk; they are signs of the Spirit within a community of people who understand themselves as united in purpose and identity—not a dispersed collection of individual churchgoers.

Thus, we work together as a community to expand the boundaries of community being led by the Spirit.

Relative to the gospel lesson, each year in the three-year lectionary cycle on this fourth Sunday of Eastertide, we hear a different part of John 10 and Jesus as the Good Shepherd. We should hear all passages together if for no other reason than to try and understand how can Jesus be the shepherd, the gate, and the gatekeeper all at once.

This passage has a lot of historical context that we don’t have time to go into, but suffice to say this is addressed to the Pharisees and is in part referencing the previous chapter where Jesus healed the blind man but the religious leaders were blinded by the threat to their authority,

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theological system, and control of the community to see the grace of God.

Further, John is writing in the 90s, 20 years after the Jewish-Roman war and destruction of the Temple. This included fighting within the Jewish community between zealots and insurrectionists and those looking for a peaceful resolution.

In that vein, Jesus identifies himself as the shepherd whose sheep know his voice and follows him. He is the good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The thieves and bandits (“insurrectionists” is a better translation) try to mislead the sheep, even though they care only for themselves.

The way of Jesus is the way of life, not death. Reconciliation, not vengeance. The dominant myth of redemption we still have 2000 years later is the myth of the warrior, who will redeem us by killing the bad guys. The way to new life, though, is not by killing the enemy, but is following the Lord of love who gave his life for others.

And finally, we have the epistle lesson from 1 Peter that I started with. It was written perhaps a bit before the Gospel of John with the intended audience being predominantly Gentile Christians living in the five Roman provinces of northern Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. First, note that first century Christians were a small struggling messianic sect of Judaism, so they would likely have had no pretensions of ridding their world of slavery, or patriarchy for that matter. And as we just discussed from John, outright revolt and violence is not the way of Christ.

Further, while slavery was indeed bad at that time, enslaved people were recognized as persons with some limited protections and could become

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respected Roman citizens. Also, they tended to come from conquered people of every ethnicity. They were not viewed as chattel with race as a justification for enslavement and never having a chance to become equal in society.

First Peter presents suffering as the inevitable result of a transformed Christian life that is holy and obedient to God in a world that is hostile to the Christian way of life. Thus, resistance and strength came from following Christ’s example: turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, standing up for what is right.

Thus, the letter assumes that Christians, slave or free, possess the moral discernment and agency to do what is right, and endure unjust suffering as a result. Although a convert’s social circumstances may not change, their consciousness of God changes their perception of their situation.

Jesus intended being his follower as a way of life with his life as the example. Unfortunately, over time Christianity became more a system of belief, such that “right” belief became the foundation of Christian salvation. But as we see today, that “right” belief depends upon who is in power, not unlike the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees in Jesus’ time.

Christ bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness. Too many people today have been led astray by thieves and insurrectionists. Let us listen for and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd being guided by the Spirit of God who leads us in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.