

OPENING PRAYERFUL HYMN

“Day by Day” (ELW 790)

OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, we gather this day as your flock to pray for your guidance. Be at work among us in our conversation and in our silence, in our questions and in our answers, in our joy and in our sorrow. You are the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In your name, we pray. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“I AM the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:14-15)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*
- Optional: Video supplement at gathermagazine.org/resources

God’s name, God’s promise

Session two

God the protector: Gate and shepherd

BY HANNAH HAWKINSON

INTRODUCTION

The prophet’s heart—like the hearts of his people—yearns for home. Although Ezekiel’s childhood in Jerusalem had been peaceful under the good King Josiah, a new, corrupt king has led the people astray. Ezekiel is surprised by a holy visit he didn’t ask for and a word that terrifies and amazes him. God, who has indeed heard the people’s cries, gives Ezekiel visions and a vocation.

“Mortal,” God says, “all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears; then go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them. Say to them, ‘Thus says I AM,’ whether they hear or refuse to hear” (Ezekiel 3:10-11).

So, rooted in God’s holy name and promise, Ezekiel speaks God’s word to a people in exile. He can’t predict when or where God will send him visions and messages for the people. One day, God gives a word of judgment, failure and lament. The next day, God promises resurrection, hope and eternal life. Sometimes Ezekiel is to proclaim both at the same time! Ezekiel holds up a mirror to his people, laying bare their own corruption, their failure to keep the holy covenant, and their desperate need for God’s grace and forgiveness.

But the people don’t listen. Ezekiel and so many others become victims of war, deported by their Babylonian captors to a land that is not their own. There they live in exile, crying out to God, fearing that God has abandoned them—or even worse, that God might not care anymore. Why would God

bother listening to them? After all, they'd failed so many times.

Of course, this is not the end of the story. Even then, Ezekiel proclaims that God has not abandoned God's people. God is still their shepherd. Even as they are overtaken by their own failure, corruption and loss of hope, I AM's holy name and promise endure. "Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?" God proclaims. "For thus says I AM: [...] I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice" (Ezekiel 34:2, 11, 16).

God, whose name is I AM, has promised to abide with us in all times and places, never abandoning us. As Ezekiel proclaims, as Jesus preaches, and as we will explore in this second Bible study session, God promises to protect us from all the forces of this world that separate us from God and one another—just as a shepherd protects their sheep. Let's dive in together!

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Can you think of a time you felt far from God? What about a time you felt like God was far from you? Was there a difference between these two feelings?

FEEDING THEM WITH JUSTICE

📖 **Read:** Ezekiel 34:1-16

The prophet Ezekiel doesn't often appear in our worship lectionary. Not known for his subtlety or nuance, Ezekiel gives prophecies that can be puzzling at best and troubling at worst. To a people living in exile (conquered by the Babylonian empire and taken away from their homes and the Jerusalem temple), Ezekiel's words offer these paradoxes: God

is angry with them and God has enduring love for them; the people are complicit in their own failures and the people are absolved by God's grace; God has departed from the temple and God continues to be present with God's people.

Ezekiel's prophetic indictment of Israel's leaders is cloaked in a metaphor that people in the ancient world understood; namely, that kings are shepherds. According to Ezekiel, there are two kinds of shepherds, defined by how they relate to their sheep. Bad shepherds or leaders rule over their flocks "with force and harshness" (v. 4), neglecting, exploiting and abusing them: "You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost" (vv. 3-4). These bad shepherds use the sheep for their own gain, abandoning them in their moment of need. The result of such leadership is inevitable. The flock scatters "over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them" (v. 6)—a thinly-veiled metaphor for the people's exile at the hands of the Babylonians.

On one hand, God's people are guilty of failing to keep God's covenant. On the other hand, Israel's leaders, its shepherds, are ultimately responsible for leading the people astray. They must be held accountable for their acts of corruption and injustice ... for feeding themselves instead of the hungry ... for tending to their own comfort instead of tending those who are injured ... for abandoning—instead of seeking out—lost people. God declares that this is the failure of the shepherds—and it is not their lack of piety, but their total disregard for justice.

However, the story doesn't end here for the bad shepherds and their flocks. Even in exile, God's name and holy promise endure for God's flock. "For thus says I AM, I myself will search for my sheep ... I will rescue them from all the places to which they

have been scattered” (vv. 11-12). As we heard in the first session of this study, God promises to be with God’s people forever. God promises to abide with us. God doesn’t stop there. God also promises to protect God’s people and care for all who are lost, all who are exiled and all who are suffering.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says I AM. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezekiel 34:15-16)

In abiding with us, our God, whose name is I AM, protects God’s people as a good shepherd protects their sheep. God stands with us when leaders and systems would tear us away from the justice, peace and abundant life that God means for us. And Jesus also takes the name of shepherd, promising to protect us.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Scripture interprets scripture. Read Psalm 23. How does this portrait of God, the good shepherd, differ from Ezekiel’s depiction of corrupt and neglectful shepherds?
3. As Ezekiel told the people, the promise of God’s protection doesn’t take away the need for accountability and justice. What is the relationship between God’s protection and God’s justice?

I AM THE GATE.

📖 **Read:** John 10:1-10

In John 10, Jesus’ “Good Shepherd” discourse begins, not with a shepherd, but with a gate. Jesus

is fresh off a miraculous, yet controversial healing of a man born blind that has again put Jesus in hot water with the religious authorities (see John 9). This time, when Jesus takes up God’s name and promise, he doesn’t compare himself to a living, breathing shepherd, but to what seems at first to be an inanimate object. “I am the gate for the sheep,” Jesus says. “Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture” (vv. 7, 9).

While most of us have probably never taken care of sheep, in Jesus’ day sheep herding was a common metaphor—one that would have resonated deeply. People knew that during the day shepherds left the gates wide open, so flocks could graze freely and safely. They also knew that each night, shepherds would guide their flocks into enclosures, often with sturdy stone walls, and then become a human gate, placing their sleeping bodies across the opening so the animals could rest peacefully while being watched over and protected. A sheep’s gate serves two purposes: as a *protective boundary* and as an *invitation to freedom and abundant life*.

All are welcome to enter the sheepfold by the gate and join the flock, Jesus says. All we need to do is receive the shepherd’s welcome, given freely and without condition. But some—the thieves and bandits of this world—make it harder for themselves, jumping over the fence, scaling the walls, and “climb[ing] in by another way” (v. 1). These thieves, who have forgotten who they are and whose they are, seek to scatter the flock and lead us away from God and from one another. Like the corrupt shepherds in Ezekiel, they want to clothe themselves with the wool (Ezekiel 34:3), regardless of the cost.

According to Jesus, such schemes leave death and destruction in their wake. Jesus, our true gate, is different. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly,” Jesus says (v. 10). Remember:

thieves and bandits “clim[b] in by another way” (v. 1), trying in vain to force their own belonging, exploiting the sheep for themselves. But the flock will not follow their voices (vv. 3-5), because the flock is *already* free. Jesus, who is the gate, has already welcomed them into abundant life with God and one another. The sheep have perfect freedom to “come in and go out and find pasture” (v. 9).

Amid the thieves and bandits of this world, Jesus is our gate. Jesus surrounds and protects us, drawing us back into pasture with God and one another. Jesus’ welcome is wide and open, inviting all God’s flock to safely graze. When the voices of those thieves and bandits reach us, tempting us to build higher walls and larger jails, to believe that we can only belong when others don’t, and to think we’re not worthy or enough unless we dominate and humiliate to prove our strength—Jesus, our gate, promises to protect us from anyone and anything that tears us away from God and from one another.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Scripture interprets scripture. Read John 9:1-12, 35-41. How does Jesus’ healing of the man who was born blind shape your understanding of Jesus as our gate?
5. Search online for images of sheepfolds in the Ancient Near East. (If someone in your group is visually impaired, ask one person to describe aloud what sheepfolds look like. As an alternative, each participant could offer one or two words that describe the image and how it makes them feel.) How does picturing ancient sheepfolds affect the way you hear this story?

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD.

📖 **Read:** John 10:11-18

It’s no surprise that over the centuries, Christ as the Good Shepherd has become one of the church’s most beloved artistic subjects. When we encounter this passage, we may picture rolling green hills, quaint sheep pens, and quiet-looking, healthy lambs. Perhaps we hear the comforting lilt of Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Sheep May Safely Graze” or the warm swells of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony. Those of us who have never tended sheep tend to imagine the work of shepherding as serene, tranquil and safe—like many a church painting. Our popular imagination neglects the peril and danger of shepherding, which Jesus puts front and center.

“I am the good shepherd,” Jesus tells us. “The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them” (vv. 11-12). Yikes! All around us, the wolves and the valleys of life loom large. A quick glance at today’s headlines reveals news of war, genocide, hatred, apathy, violence, death, destruction, corruption, deceit, injustice, illness and pain. The wolves and valleys in our lives and in those of our neighbors pull us away from the community for which God has made us. In the face of it all, Jesus our good shepherd promises to abide with us and protect us.

“I am the Good Shepherd,” Jesus proclaims. “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:14-15)

But Jesus’ protection doesn’t take shape in the ways we might expect. Jesus doesn’t face off with the wolves for a fistfight; he doesn’t beat them in a battle of wits; he doesn’t best them in a mighty duel. Instead, Jesus’ protection is rooted in relationship, humility and vulnerability. Protecting the flock isn’t safe, but vulnerable. It is not serene, but sacrificial.

It's not about wielding power with clenched fists but about giving up power with open hands. And it's for the sake of the sheep—you, me, all people and all of creation—that we might know the abundant life God has made for us.

Jesus joins us in all the joy and sorrow, born as a baby to a poor family in the middle of nowhere. He heals the sick, gathers with his friends, goes off to spend time alone, does the work of justice, feeds the hungry, makes peace, spends time with the nobodies and outcasts of the world, suffers and dies on a cross, and is laid in the tomb, so that even in death, we will not be alone. Jesus goes with us, comforting and encouraging us in life, calling us to rest in his care. Jesus leads and guides us along the way, lifting us up when we can't bear to take another step. Jesus offers us his radically countercultural protection, side by side, step by step, moment by moment, day by day. Wolves surround us, but none of them, not even death itself, has the last word.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. Scripture interprets scripture. Read Jeremiah 23:1-6. In what ways does this prophetic passage align with Jesus' words? How do Jesus' words differ from the Jeremiah 23 passage?
7. Jesus tells us that his protection isn't like the world's protection. What do you see as the difference?

CONCLUSION

Bible readers often return to Jesus' "Good Shepherd" discourse. Jesus' words are familiar and comforting, providing a safe harbor in times of trouble. So far, we've learned that true, good shepherding is difficult, dangerous and sometimes life-threatening. Jesus enters into this work voluntarily, out of God's great love for us and all creation. We've talked about Jesus being the gate that stands wide open, inviting us and all creation

into perfect freedom. We've also heard that Jesus is a gate that can firmly shut to protect us from thieves and bandits that threaten to tear us apart from God and one another. And we've been invited to new life in God's pasture, following the voice of the good shepherd who knows each of our names, stays with us and binds us together as one body. That said, it's still easy to miss Jesus' radical vision. Lest we think that Jesus only cares about some sheep and not others, Jesus declares: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." Jesus offers a promise: "I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16).

The protection of the Good Shepherd is not the world's idea of protection. In a world that tells us those who are not like us are a threat, Jesus, the good shepherd, draws us—in all our diversity—together in true unity. In a world that tells us we must dominate, the Good Shepherd shows us the way of true victory. In a world that warns us to look out for number one because no one else will, the Good Shepherd "lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). When the world claims protecting ourselves must be built on the suffering of others—on death and destruction, stealing and killing, oppression and violence—Jesus, the Good Shepherd, reminds us that there is more than enough room in God's pasture for everyone to have life abundantly.

Jesus, who is our gate and our good shepherd, protects us not by enacting violence or wielding earthly power, but by offering himself as a sacrifice. We see that sacrificial living and giving are not foolishness, but Jesus' ultimate victory—and ours. That victory is for all of us. Because we all belong to his flock. No exceptions. There is one flock and one shepherd.

May we receive Jesus' invitation to "come in" through the gate, and "go out and find pasture" (10:9). May we reject the false voices of "thieves

and bandits” (10:1) and corrupt shepherds that pull us away from God’s beloved community. May we rejoice in the abundant love of the Good Shepherd brings us to new life in I AM’s pasture.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. In what ways have you seen members of our diverse human family living as one flock, with one shepherd? What role do our differences play in true unity?
9. If God protects us and abides with us, why is there so much pain and suffering in our lives and in the world? This question persists among believers and resists simple answers. Which, if any, passages we’ve explored in this session speak to this tension?

CLOSING PRAYER

God our shepherd, Christ our gate, Spirit our guide, thank you for your holy name and promise, which endure, even with all we’ve done and left undone. Fill us with your love. Nourish us with your grace. Sustain us with your hope. We ask this in the name of the Creator, the name of the Son and the name of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us” (*ELW* 789)

God's name, God's promise

Session two

Gate and Shepherd

BY HANNAH HAWKINSON

INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite hymns, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need” (ELW 782), is an adaptation of Psalm 23 set to a North American folk tune. I especially love how, after a line about God’s house being our “abode” and our work being “praise,” we sing:

*Here would I find a settled rest, while others go
and come; no more a stranger or a guest, but like
a child at home.*

God invites us to rest in God’s care—not as a stranger or a guest—but “like a child at home.” This hymn reminds us that Jesus is our good shepherd and the gate for the sheep (John 10).

Our Session 2 goal is for participants to consider what it means to have God, whose name is “I AM,” abide with us and protect us like a shepherd. We tend to think of protection as a “brutish” word, implying physical strength and bravado. But God’s protection is something much better. God promises to protect God’s people—and that means that God takes a side. God stands with the oppressed. God’s tender love is an act of justice, a repudiation of false shepherds and corrupt leaders who use and abuse their flocks for their own gain. But God’s fierce tenderness comes with a cost—God’s own life. Jesus understands this. By taking on God’s holy name and promise, Jesus declares that he is the manifestation of God’s promise to God’s people to be with them forever.

Leaders can help participants consider one of the greatest theological quandaries: the “problem of evil,”

or why we suffer if God has promised to protect us. As leaders, we need to avoid offering such platitudes as: “It’s all part of God’s plan.” “If God brought you to it, God will bring you through it.” “Everything happens for a reason.” None of these narratives are true. God does not ordain or rejoice in our (or creation’s) suffering. That is not who God is. In group conversation and in your own heart, try to push back on these unhelpful narratives and platitudes.

We push back by acknowledging the unanswerable tension at the heart of the problem of evil. We look for places and situations where we can have a more expansive understanding of God’s protection. We hope for God’s protection yet leave room for lament. Together, we ask: What does God’s protection really mean in this broken and hurting world?

TIPS FOR LEADERS

Optional beginning and ending: Consider starting and ending the session with two or three minutes of intentional silence and allowing God’s presence to wash over you. Notice what it feels like to breathe and simply be in this moment.

“Scripture interprets Scripture” discussion

questions: Some discussion questions begin with the phrase “Scripture interprets scripture.” This was a central teaching of Martin Luther, who encouraged people to study the scriptures by taking a broad view of the entire biblical narrative and noting how various passages are in conversation. As we do so, we ask:

1. Where do the scriptures agree, inviting us into the joy of holy clarity?
2. Where do the scriptures disagree, inviting us into the blessing of holy conflict?

3. Where does studying these scriptures together offer nuance, inviting us into the tension of holy mystery?

If participants wish to go deeper, here are additional passages to explore together:

- “I Will Feed Them with Justice”: Isaiah 40:1-11; Matthew 18:10-14; Revelation 7:9-17
- “I AM the Gate”: Genesis 28:10-22; Numbers 27:15-23; Matthew 13:13-15
- “I AM the Good Shepherd”: 1 Samuel 17:32-50; Acts 20:28-32; Hebrews 13:20-21

Making real-world connections: As a group, talk about ways you and your group can join in advocacy and public witness in your community. Reach out to your leaders and legislators—or better yet, meet with them in person—to advocate for local and national policies and laws that protect the rights and dignity of all neighbors. Participate in local community efforts to get out the vote. Attend or host a community education event. Participate in a peaceful march or protest. Learn more about Lutheran approaches to advocacy at www.womenoftheelca.org/ministry-action/justice and www.elca.org/advocacy.

SHORTENING SUGGESTIONS

The entire study can be completed in a 90- or 120-minute session or a series of weekly half-hour to one-hour studies. Larger groups can break up into pairs or groups of three for discussion. Here are shortening suggestions:

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Ask group members to read the entire study before they come.
2. After a time of silence, do “Opening hymn”

and “Opening prayer.”

3. Ask each participant to name one thing they appreciated in the study and one question they’d like to discuss.
4. Spend the remaining time discussing the questions raised by your group.
5. After a time of silence, end with “Closing prayer” and the Lord’s prayer.

A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

This “book report” format works especially well with medium- to large-sized groups.

1. After a time of silence, sing “Opening hymn” and pray “Opening prayer.”
2. Break into 4-6 smaller pairs or groups. Assign each group to do 1-2 sessions of the study (“Introduction,” “I Will Feed Them With Justice,” “I AM the Gate,” “I AM the Good Shepherd,” and “Conclusion: One Flock, One Shepherd”). Ask them to read and discuss their assigned section for 15-20 minutes. (Feel free to adapt. For example, you could ask one group to do both the introduction and conclusion.)
3. Conclude with three- to five-minute presentations from each group about what they see as the takeaways from their section.
4. After another time of silence, end with “Closing prayer,” the Lord’s prayer, and “Closing hymn.” 🌿