

“The Gate”
 May 7, 2017
 Text: John 10:1-10

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
 Fourth Sunday of Easter

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

I. The Lost Sheep of Israel

Sheep. Shepherds. Gatekeepers. Jesus teaches in ways that reach the people. In a first century society in which sheep herding is common, people understand this sheep metaphor and they fully know what he means when he says,

“Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a bandit and a thief.” This is the way Jesus describes the counterfeits, the false shepherds who sneak in and steal—the false messiahs who lead the people astray. Selfish priests whose only concern is themselves. Blind teachers in the temple who keep people from the grace of God, and exclude them from community.

These are the injustices of the day which cause Jesus to weep.

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matt 9:36)

The ancient prophet Ezekiel also uses the metaphor to illustrate God's broken heart for the people of Israel:

"So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd...my sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them." (Ezekiel 5:6) This Old Testament passage sharply contrasts to the flowing poetry of Psalm 23.

And what even prompts Jesus to launch into this speech in the 10th chapter of John is what happens in the 9th chapter when Jesus heals a man who was blind from birth. This causes a problem because Jesus does this healing on a sabbath day. The matter is brought before the religious authorities who say,

"This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath."

To some, the letter of the law is more important than the spirit of the law. And even if someone born blind can now see, even if they can joyfully engage in community like never before, it matters not to those who seek to maintain power. Jesus is a threat to that power and he must be denied and stopped. Darkness will always attempt to cover the light.

II. Trouble in Our World

Danger lurks in our world as well. There are people and things sneaking in to steal, kill, and destroy. There are circumstances which break the heart of God and cause Jesus to weep.

There are political voices on both sides turning us against each other for their own gain. Be careful, and remember, what divides us seeks to destroy us.

Counterfeits are deceiving us every day. There are false prophets, wayward and dangerous religious leaders, and people who abuse the Bible only to harm others. In our world, leaders, celebrities and institutions are letting us down all the time.

But it's not just people. There are powerful addictions that sneak in, catch us off guard, and steal us away. We are a culture that continues to struggle with alcoholism, drug addiction, and eating disorders.

The bandits and thieves of our time sneak in looking to steal collective our soul. And we, like sheep, have been led astray. We are all over the mountainside, and cliffs fall beneath us all around.

Where do we look for our security? Where is the shelter we need as life brings the challenges that threaten to take us down?

III. Good News for the Lost Sheep of Israel

According to the Gospels, the Epistles, and the prophecies of the Old Testament, for the people of the first century it is the reality of Jesus. When Jesus of Nazareth begins to preach, something new and different is being heard through the land. This is the voice of one who teaches with authority. This is the voice that comes to turn the status quo upside-down. And that is what is happening. Jesus turns it all on its head.

For the ones who have been abused, marginalized, forgotten, maligned, picked on and shunned, there is a good shepherd who cares about the welfare of each and

every sheep. The lame do walk and the blind now see. And there is a watchful gatekeeper. And there is one who even says he is “The Gate.” The gate of life itself. Life is possible, hope is restored, there is a Messiah.

The rod and the staff of the shepherd *do* bring comfort.

The shepherd will protect them from that which seeks to attack, kill and destroy. The prophecies of Ezekiel are fulfilled:

“I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” (Ezekiel 34:16)

“You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord.” (Ezekiel 34:31)

This happens because of what Jesus promises. Jesus says, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)*

Finally, one is sent who places the interests of others above his own.

IV. Good News for Us

In today’s world, this is the good news we need to hear. There is a way to life. We can be rescued and returned to the fold. The reality of Jesus the Christ pervades all of creation now and opens a way into life itself. If the resurrection is real, all of life is being redeemed. There is hope for the hopeless, and joy for those who grieve.

Yes, there is derision today for the those who would be considered nothing but dumb sheep. Sheeple, some might call us. Some may say our faith is lame. But, in truth, all are following someone’s voice. Ours is the voice of a Good Shepherd.

If we consider the metaphor of the shepherd we can understand that through the rod and the staff, we have protection and guidance. And by careful listening we can recognize the voice of the shepherd. This happens when reading and hearing Holy Scripture; this is discovered in the practices of prayer and centering silences and meditation; the voice is also learned when engaged in mission and caring for the least among us. Through all these practices and disciplines come wisdom and discernment, which leads to knowing the voice of the shepherd.

But Jesus claims to be not only the shepherd, but also the entrance to the sheepfold.

“I am the gate,” Jesus says, *“Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”*

Life itself goes in and out through this gate. But it is Jesus who determines who goes in and out of the gate. We are not the gate. The church is not the gate. Jesus is the gate. Those who hear his voice are all in this together. And as those who identify as his followers how will we be recognized? In this culture of selfish gain, do we steal, or do we give? In this world of war, will we kill, or will we bring life? In this land of violence, will we destroy, or will we build up? In this polarized society that angrily argues over every issue, will we further divide, or will we work to unite? Because we love God with all our heart, and all our mind, and all our soul, and all our strength, and we love our neighbor as ourselves, there is only one way we will be known. They will know we are Christians by our love. Because the one whose voice we follow says,

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

And how did we get from there to here? How does a first century carpenter’s son/teacher/preacher/healer/miracle worker make such a difference that the world and all of creation is forever changed? Because of a profound move from the compassionate and faithful heart of God in which the essence of sacrifice is manifested in a good shepherd who lays down his life for all time.

Today the “Good Shepherd” remains at the Table.

Today the “Gatekeeper” is at the Table.

Today the “Gate” to life itself is at the Table.

Prepare your hearts today to come to the Table. Amen.