

Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

“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. John 10:1-10

In our gospel reading today we hear about a sheepfold with a gate. First century shepherds did not have access to the fencing materials we have today. They would make use of caves and they would build low-walled enclosures out of stone to protect the sheep at night from thieves and bandits. Many historians believe that the shepherd would become a human gate by lying down in the opening of the stone wall. In this way, the shepherd could guard the sheep from predators as well as keep the sheep safely contained inside the sheepfold. For the most part, this worked - until the thieves and bandits climbed in by another way to steal the sheep, which did happen, because sheep were very valuable.

Walls and gates create enclosures. Sometimes being in the sheepfold is a good thing. The sheep inside are protected and safe, they can sleep without fear because they trust the shepherd. But if the sheep stay enclosed in the sheepfold all the time, they aren't able to graze in green pastures, or drink beside still waters, or get exercise – and that is bad for their health. Some of us might be experiencing some negative consequences in these stay at home times – sleeping late, eating and drinking more than is good for us, and not getting enough exercise, never mind the daily steps we are missing from errands and activities we are no longer able to do. We can relate to being penned up too long!

Our gospel today reveals Jesus as the gate, which can also be translated as door. We also hear Jesus described as the shepherd. In fact, the very next verse following our text today is “I am the good shepherd.” So, in this blending of Jesus as both gate and shepherd, we hear the ambiguity and metaphor so often used in John's gospel. John states this intentional use of metaphor out loud saying, “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, because they could not understand, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.” For Jesus to *be* the gate, based on the practice of the shepherd lying down in the wall opening, is striking. It reminds me of the last verse of Psalm 121 – The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth for evermore.

Notice that he does not say, “I am that which separates, isolates, divides, and segregates.” Nor does he say, “I am the gate to keep you locked away safe from every harm and danger of the world.” What Jesus says is, “I am the gate. The doorway. The opening. The portal where freedom begins and the entrance into new and abundant life.

We might not associate gates or doors with freedom. We think of locks and alarms, confinement, restrictions. We imagine doors and gates as barriers to opportunity. But what if Jesus is a different kind of gate? A gate that opens out instead of holding us within. Not as a barrier or hindrance but the opening through which newness awaits. Not a gate but rather a gateway to wide open possibility, hope, and healing. “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” I am the gateway to salvation and wholeness of life.

What if this passage is not about restrictions or self-protection at all? In our human fear and frailty, we are inclined to build walls, close doors and lock gates. We do this to keep perceived dangers out and to keep what we love and cherish safe within. Might Jesus be encouraging us to trust that there is power far greater than any fear we have? Power to free us from fear? Power to deliver us from our need to stockpile and fortify our earthly treasures?

When we can trust that Jesus is the gate, it frees us from the weight of our need to control, it opens our lives to an expanse of love and joy and promise. When gatekeeping is no longer our job, suddenly we have the mental, physical, and spiritual power to focus on the coming of the kingdom and newness of life right here and now.

This is not to deny that life may bring threat and danger. The thieves and bandits that are a result of our wrong choices and their consequences, will still, from time to time, climb in by another way. They are the voices that will lead us away from the good shepherd. Life has its challenges. The promise from God is that in any threat or danger, our shepherd will be with us.

Maybe the questions for us are not about who is in or out of the safety of the sheepfold. Maybe they are about recognizing all the ways we resist the open gate, the ways we close our minds to change, the ways we keep our deepest hopes and dreams penned up inside. And just maybe, Jesus has the answers to our questions, if we will be still and listen for his voice.

This is where the Church serves as our safe pasture. As the early Christian community gathered to devote themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, we too will continue to devote ourselves to these things – in person again eventually, and for right now on Zoom, or exchanging cares and concerns, thanksgivings and joys through social media or handwritten notes or a phone call. We do this because the Church is the sheepfold, the place where we learn to recognize and respond to the voice of the shepherd. This describes the Church’s inner life, which is preparing us for our life out in the world, a life of abundance – not for ourselves alone but for all.

In the weeks and months to come, we will be tempted to listen to the voices of thieves and bandits. Voices that will stoke fear and anxiety, or that will discount any need for precautions. Voices that will make promises they cannot keep about our well-being. Those are not the voice of the shepherd. But we will listen for the voice of our shepherd as we continue in teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers – however that might look going forward.

The sheepfold can be a metaphor for the Church, with Jesus as both gate and shepherd. We are called into the sheepfold to find life, and to strengthen our relationship with God. Then we are led out of the sheepfold, following the shepherd to new pastures, beyond our comfort zones; following him in all the ways he loves and cares for the *lost* sheep, the ones in need of healing, the ones who are hungry, the ones in need of abundant life, the ones who are waiting to hear the voice of the shepherd. Amen.