

John 10:1-10

¹⁰ 'Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice.' ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.^[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

It seems that the people who set aside the lectionary readings for this Good Shepherd Sunday have made a mistake. In our Gospel reading Jesus speaks boldly to the Pharisees, he gets ready to bring to their minds Psalm 23 and how caring and loving the Lord of the heavens and the earth is. At the same time, he's also about to point to himself as the physical embodiment of that same Lord. And Jesus declares to those listening that I am the gate.

Before he even gets to his being the Good Shepherd, there's something else he needs to reveal. He is the gate, the door, the portal. A similar form of this word in Greek can also mean "an opportunity". Now, I admit, my mind balks a bit at Jesus being a gate or a door. It's inanimate, a piece of wood. That's not the living and vibrant God that I know. I prefer the Good Shepherd: he's caring, loving, he lays down his life for the sheep.

I love the Good Shepherd so much because there are so many thieves and robbers – some of them even dressed up as shepherds. Keep in mind that these words of Jesus are being spoken to the Pharisees – religious leaders. In the last chapter of John, they've been upset at him being so bold as to heal a blind man *on the Sabbath!* How dare he! As Jesus speaks to the Pharisees, I hear echoes of God's warning prophecy in Ezekiel 34 (2b-4):

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.”

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is declaring these Pharisees that should be shepherds to be thieves and robbers. And why is that? Well, to some extent because they've not healed the sick and they're not searching for the lost members of the flock. Instead, they are so concerned with obeying God's Law by their human works that they add even more laws on top of them. They've become strict and regimented to the point that something simple like “You shall not take the name of YAHWEH in vain” has become “never speak the name ofthe Lord”. They've attempted to make their own gate and their own gatekeeper.

And that's the greater problem. The Pharisees haven't entered by the gate, the door to the sheepfold. They don't acknowledge Jesus, and they don't acknowledge God *as he is in Scripture*. You know, the things he's *actually* said.

And with that understanding it's probably time for me to tackle my own misgivings about Jesus being the gate. He said it himself, so even if I'm uncomfortable about it, let's deal with it.

Jesus is a gate or a door. Alright, well, we all know doors. You walked through a number of them already today, like a bedroom door, a bathroom door, a car door, a bus door, the doors of this church. What did those doors do? Some of them might have given you privacy, sanctuary, or a safe place to be with your loved ones. Others might have protected you from the elements. Jesus certainly can offer us these things.

But Jesus wasn't just speaking about any door. He spoke about a sheepfold. And the gate of the sheepfold might do some of these things, but that's not what's important to Jesus. The gate is the way for a sheep to exit the sheepfold and live. If a robber or a thief steals a sheep from the sheepfold, it's not going to be alive for much longer. It might end up as a tasty stew. If the sheep want to live, they need to follow the Good Shepherd through the gate.

And Jesus is the gate to the sheepfold precisely because he is the Good Shepherd. Many pens that a shepherd might bring his sheep to in Jesus' day didn't have one of those wooden inanimate gates that I might think of. They just had an opening. And once the shepherd had called all his sheep into the pen, his own body would become the gate. In this fashion he could even prop himself between the stones and sleep, knowing that the sheep would be safe.

And we know that our living, breathing, loving gate did sleep for a time. He laid down his body for us, and then he rose again to new life. That life is why he's the gate. He wants that life to be ours. Because he knows that the sheepfold is a fine place for sheep to stay for a time, but it's not where they will thrive. It's not where fullness of life can be found. It's not the kingdom of heaven.

That is where Jesus calls his sheep. He calls them by name. He calls you by name. You know his voice. You've heard his voice today. You've heard him call you through other believers, and through the Scriptures. And you've responded, just as that blind man which Jesus healed did: "Lord, I believe!" In your belief, you did exactly what young Edith did this morning. At the call of Jesus' voice and by his command, you came to the gate and entered in. Through water and the Word, you entered into Christ. And in him, he leads you out to find pasture. That is, eternal life.

Now, we do have some guests here today, so perhaps the journey I've just described isn't exactly where you're at. You might find yourself still in the sheepfold. If so, please don't let that discourage you. The call of Jesus – our Good Shepherd – is for all who might listen to his voice. His voice calls to the sheep that have strayed and to those that have already passed through the gate alike. The voice of Jesus calls out saying: Come to me, you who are burdened

and weary, and I will give you rest. Come, that I might keep you safe from the thieves and robbers. Come and receive the abundant life that I offer.

The world seems to have a lot of doors in it. There are a lot of opportunities that you might be presented with. Many of them will lead you to bigger and better things. Some might bring you money or power or fame, maybe even earthly glory. But there's one voice that calls, one door that leads to abundant eternal life. This voice calls you by name. This door is a living, breathing, gracious and eternal Good Shepherd. He watches over you as you go out and as you come in. In him, each of us has life and has it to the full.

Amen.