

May 3, 2020
Rev. Kerry Smith

John 10:1-10 The Good Shepherd
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 10:1-10 New Revised Standard Version

“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.

There is a kid’s song called “I Just Wanna be a Sheep.” “I just wanna be a sheep, ba ba ba, ba, ba, ba. I pray the Lord my soul to keep, I just wanna be a sheep, ba ba ba ba ba. I don’t wanna be a Sadducee, cause they’re so sad you see, I just wanna be a sheep. I don’t want to be a Pharisee, cause they’re not sad you see. I just wanna be a sheep.” The scripture passage that we read is all about sheep.

When we hear this passage from John’s Gospel, it is hard not to hear the words of the 23rd Psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside still waters, restores my life, leads me in right paths for the sake of the Lord’s name. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.”

Right before the scripture passage that we read, Jesus heals a man who was born blind. The Pharisees investigate to see if Jesus really did heal the blind man. Jesus tells the Pharisees a parable about a shepherd and a thief. The thief is stopped because the sheep won’t follow the thief out of the gate. The sheep know the shepherd’s voice.

A friend was in Palestine years ago standing on a ridge overlooking a long, narrow gorge. Below her the gorge opened out into rolling grass. It was beautiful! There was a single trail on the gorge floor, and then branched out into dozens of trails when it reached the grass. A group of shepherds strolled down the gorge trail, talking with one another. A long line of sheep followed the sheep. As the shepherds got to the forks of the trail, they shook hands with each other and separated, each taking a different path as they headed out into the grasslands. As the shepherds headed their separate ways, the mass of sheep behind them automatically divided into smaller flocks, each flock going down the branch trail behind its appropriate shepherd.

When the different shepherds were down their separate trails by a few hundred yards, each shepherd turned to scan his own sheep. There were some sheep left behind, wandering in confusion among the rocks and brush. Then one of the shepherds cupped his hands around his mouth and called in in a loud cry, “Ky-yia-yia-yia-yia.” At his shout a couple of stray lambs perked up their ears and bounded toward his voice. Then a second shepherd tilted back his head calling with a distinctly different sound, “Yip-yip-yip-yippo-yip.” A few more strays hurried straight toward him. Then another shepherd called his strays with a shrill, “Hoot-hoot-hoot!” Each shepherd called and each of the stray sheep heard a familiar voice and knew exactly which

shepherd they should run to. My friend said that none of the wandering sheep seemed to notice any voice but the voice of their own shepherd.¹

Jesus says that he is the gate and right after this passage Jesus will say that he is the good shepherd. A gate separates pasture and wilderness. It separates safety from the unknown. A shepherd puts the sheep before himself. Jesus feeds his sheep and he builds up the weak ones. Jesus heals the sick, Jesus goes after the strays, and looks for the lost. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows his own sheep and his own sheep know him. Jesus gathers the sheep and protects them from the wolves and coyotes. Jesus lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus says that he has come that his sheep may have life and have it abundantly. Abundant life sounds really good right now!

The God we believe in is a God of abundant life. Our God is a God of peace and life, justice and goodness. Our God creates pink and orange sunsets, and trees that you can wrap your arms around. Our God creates beautiful pastures. Jesus said, “I am the gate for the sheep.” In The Message translation Jesus says, “anyone who goes through me will be cared for – will freely go in and find pasture.” Being in the pasture feels safe.

It is easy for us to think of God as being the gentle pasture. I feel like I’m in the pasture when I’m sitting at White Rock Lake looking at the water as it moves and feeling the wind on my face. I feel like I’m in the pasture when I have lit a candle and I take a deep breath to feel God’s presence with me. I feel like I’m in the pasture when I hear laughter or I eat a good meal. All of those moments in a day when I experience the love, protection, and nourishment of God.

It is in moments of that stillness that I remember that Jesus has got me. Jesus has got us all. Jesus protects us, provides for us, cares for us, sacrifices for us, and gives us life, and we are called to respond by trusting, listening, embracing, thriving. We may feel tired and not sure how we can continue living in what feels like crisis mode over the long haul, but Jesus has us and we will get through. One of my favorite things to do is to visit the ocean where there is sand. I feel so close to God as I dig my feet down deep in the sand. I love to feel the tide pulling me in. In that moment I feel healing, loved, and fed by the Good Shepherd.

Some of us feel like we are in the wilderness right now. Wide open, scary wilderness. We feel unprotected. Our jobs are at risk, our health is at risk, we are overwhelmed and balancing financial insecurity or the needs of others. We are trying to homeschool and regular routines are out the window. Some of us are at-risk in our homes because they are not a safe place. Some of us are getting up and going to work in nursing homes or hospitals afraid that there won’t be enough masks or PPE to protect us.

There are so many stories in the Bible of God being with us in the wilderness. When Jesus says he is the gate, he is also the gate to the wilderness. Listening for the shepherd helps us walk through the wilderness. Runners know that if we wait to drink until we are thirsty, we have waited too long. We have to take care of ourselves regularly, now with an eye toward the long haul. We need to stop, breath, talk to God, or just be still. Depending on who is sheltering in place with you, you might need to go to the closet to be still and alone. Or you might need to have a zoom session with a friend so you don’t feel so isolated. Or you might need to go outside to escape and feel the sunshine.

God’s abundant life is with us in the wilderness. It is in the wilderness that we encounter the wideness of God’s mercy. It is in the wilderness that we encounter transformation. Jesus is our shepherd on both sides of the gate. God is in the sand and the tide. God is in the dry sand and

¹ Sheep illustration found here: <https://www.propreacher.com/shepherds-voice/>

the wet sand. God is in the gentle and the powerful experiences. So much of life now feels black or white, safe or dangerous. God is in the both/and.

I wanted to show you a poster that I have in my office here at the church. I bought it at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England. The painting is called "The Light of the World" and it was painted by William Holman-Hunt in 1900. I have bought this poster twice. Once when we lived in England in 2001. When we got back home, I laminated it but the laminating made it really shiny and hard to see. So, when we went back to England two summers ago in 2018, I bought the poster again! This time, I put it in a frame and it isn't as shiny. Jesus is knocking on a door, but if you look, there isn't a doorknob on Jesus' side. The doorknob is on the other side, where we are. It is up to us to open ourselves up to God. Do you think you can grasp that doorknob and open the door to let Jesus into your life?

Last week I shared wise John Thornburg's question, "What are you learning about yourself during this time?" This week I want to add another one of his questions to have you think about, "What is God doing in our midst?"

God is with us on both sides of the gate, one side leads to safety and one side to uncertainty. On both sides there is abundant life of grace and love. The Good Shepherd is out there with us, loving us, protecting us, caring for us. What is God doing in our midst? What gives you hope? Whether we are in the pasture or in the wilderness, we are held within the love of God. That love is hope. Hope helps us to stay present, to stay in the flow of God's mercy no matter what storms are happening around us. Hope gives us quiet strength beyond anything we have ever known. Thanks be to God, Amen.²

² Much thanks to Sarah Bessey for her writing on "I am the Gate." <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/i-am-the-gate> and her writing on "I am the Good Shepherd." <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/i-am-the-good-shepherd>