

A Gate for the Sheepfold

Liminal Season series #1

John 10:1-10

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Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 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. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore, Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

John 10:1-10 The Message

Shepherd and Sheep

The Lord is my Shepherd. That is a very familiar line and image for many. These are the first words of Psalm 23. As we reflected at our Zoom gathering on Wednesday, this image and psalm are powerful, meaningful and for some emotionally wrought. For some Psalm 23 is connected to times of loss and funerals. For others it is a comforting image. There are a variety of translations – the King James Version, the modern Bobby McFerrin song and one by Nan Merrill – The Beloved is my shepherd. There is a longing for the comforting words these days from this psalm – goodness related to actions, presence of God, the Beloved setting a table in our midst and sitting with us – as well as an awareness of how this psalm reminds us of valley of death, of anguish, of suffering of so many in this time of the Covid 19 pandemic.

So I have been thinking about shepherds and sheep and pastures this week. It is a bit of leap for most of us in the year 2020 to connect with sheep and shepherds. There are some wonderful goats grazing in Marin to munch on the hillsides to keep down the fire risk. I love seeing the pictures of the goats, but I am not around any sheep these days.

Jesus employs the imagery of first-century shepherding practice in an attempt to reveal his own identity and his relationship to us. Now, the most experience I've ever had with sheep was in Scotland. First on the island of Iona. We were there with our 2 sons and one afternoon we ventured to the east side of the island where we were told there was a small golf course.

None of us are golfers but we set out with some borrowed clubs and balls. We found the “golf course” with 9 holes, some flat areas and many sheep grazing on the course. “Watch out for the sheep droppings” – shouted a visitor as he left the windy and simple course where many sheep and cows were grazing. Later in the trip I was driving our rental car from Pitlochry to St. Andrews on the eastern coast. Sheep crossing signs were everywhere and the road continued to be narrower and narrower and no fencing. Sheep had the right of way. No shepherds in sight.

If you're anything like me, you have no clue about shepherding of any sort, ancient or modern. Therefore, in order to access what John calls a “figure of speech,” we first acknowledge our lack of personal contact with Jesus' choice of image, and second we embrace the opportunity to use our imaginations.

The scene

So imagine with me a rolling plain, dotted with humps and hillocks. Dusk descends, and the shepherd leads his flock into the sheepfold. One of the hillocks has been hollowed out, and the sheep huddle inside next to the sheep of several other shepherds who share this particular fold. A pair of piled rock walls extends out a few feet from the sides of the hill. The shepherd lies down in the space between the low walls, effectively sealing the enclosure. Thieves and bandits and wolves will have a difficult time getting in with the shepherds on guard. The sheep are safe in the sheepfold.

When the shepherd arises the next morning, Jesus explains, “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.” The sheep can't spend their whole lives in the sheepfold, no matter how safe the enclosure may be. There's no food in the fold, after all. The sheep may be comfortable and safe, but the sheep must follow the shepherd out of the fold in order to find sustenance, in order to live. (1)

Shepherd

In John 10, Jesus says “I am the gate for the sheep” and later “I am the good shepherd.” Admittedly, the image of Jesus as shepherd makes for a far more natural comparison than comparing Jesus to a gate. And how can Jesus be both at the same time? These two images are part of a richly layered, extended metaphor that speaks of sheep, shepherd, gate, gatekeeper, strangers, thieves, bandits, and wolves.

Jesus begins by describing who he is *not*. Those who climb into the sheepfold in a furtive way are thieves and bandits who do not care about the sheep but only about their own gain (10:1). By contrast, the shepherd enters the sheepfold openly, by means of the gate (10:2). He is recognized by the sheep, who know his voice (10:3). When he calls his sheep by name, they follow him, and he leads them out to pasture (10:4). The sheep will not follow a stranger but instead will flee from one whose voice they do not recognize (10:5).

John's use of the perfect tense in this verse – 'they have not known' instead of 'they don't know' – is a little jarring. It speaks to a long relationship between the sheep and the shepherd, cultivating familiarity with the sound of his voice. εἶδω is a favorite use of John's for knowing or seeing and is often in the perfect tense. (2)

Voice of the shepherd

This is an amazing part of the being a shepherd. The sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd and only follow that shepherd. The shepherd calls sheep by name. Sheep learn early as ewes to know the sound of the shepherd's voice and associate it with benefits – food, protection, security, life.

Hearing one's name in love from the Beloved is woven throughout the Bible particularly Easter stories.

On that first Easter morning in John's gospel, Mary Magdalene weeps from shock. Looking inside once again, she sees two angels. She doesn't seem to care that they are angels, and murmurs, "They took away my Jesus, and I don't know where they took him." Then she turned, saw the gardener standing there. Like the angels, he wants to know why she is crying. She says, "Sir, if you took him away, tell me, and I will take him back." He calls her by name: "Mary!" With that, her dark world is flooded with light. Christ is alive, present tense..

Paul in the Bible had his eyes opened. There he was, maybe two or three years after the death of Jesus. His name was still Saul. He was a pious Jew, trying to snuff out that new sect of Jesus-followers. A bright light knocked him off his high horse. Then the great Voice spoke, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" That was the moment everything changed. He knew who it was, because he was known. He was called by name.

Gate

In John's gospel, Jesus is speaking in present tense – I am the gate, I am the good shepherd. It's all in the present tense. When the words were set to parchment, it was 90 AD, about 60 years after Jesus' death. Those early followers of Jesus' way knew that resurrection is real and present. It's real where love is stronger than whatever threatens to scatter and destroy.

It is interesting that Jesus does not describe himself as the gatekeeper necessarily, but rather as the gate itself. Jesus calls himself the gate, because that was part of what a shepherd was. In sheep-folds where there was no actual physical gate, the shepherd would lie himself down in the opening which allowed entry and exit. In this way the shepherd knew who or what came and went or who or what attempted to come and go and so could serve as protector of the sheep. Jesus was and is the door or gate of the sheepfold.

The function of the gate is to keep the sheep together in the sheepfold during the night, safe from thieves and predators. During the day the gate is opened so that the sheep can go out,

following their shepherd, to find pasture. The gate and the shepherd work together for the well-being of the sheep, so that the flock thrives. Jesus is both the gate and the shepherd at the same time; he guards and protects his sheep, and he provides for their nourishment, for their life in abundance.

The context of Jesus' words about gates and sheep and shepherds is important. It follows directly after his healing of the man blind from birth in John 9.

Although there is no one-to-one correspondence between elements of the metaphor and the narrative it follows, certain associations are hard to miss. The Pharisees who have interrogated the blind man in John 9 are supposed to be the shepherds of Israel, those who care for, protect, and nourish the people. Instead, they expel the healed blind man from their community, refusing to believe that Jesus and his healing work come from God. They are more concerned about guarding their power and authority than about the well-being of the people. (3)

Having already restored the sight of the man, Jesus seeks him out again after his expulsion from the synagogue and brings him into the community of his followers. His days of isolation are over; he now knows himself to be a valued member of Jesus' flock, cared for and protected.

The gate opens wide. All people, all sheep are welcomed. The purpose of the gate is to guard against all that threatens the well-being of the sheep -- thieves, bandits, and wolves. While humans use gates to separate, Jesus is the gate that opens, that allows connection. Even as the virus is a closed gate that keeps us apart, in Christ we are spiritually together.

A gate to connections and friendships and relationships

A gate to open to all people

A gate for caring and feeding – Tuesday night dinners for the unsheltered

Gates and building a new sheepfold for abundant life

We want to be back together in that sheepfold worshipping, praying, singing, serving our neighbors. It is going to be a little longer to make sure everyone can safely gather.

What will that new sheepfold look like? We are starting to think about that. There are some things about our life together and our world that are changing.

Christ intends us to have this life together. Christ calls us to fields where following means tending to one another—to our sheepmates. Shepherding stresses the communal nature of the sheep. Our singular noun **flock** is one made of many. The church proclaims the good news that I am not alone. We are the flock, and we share a common life.

The abundant life adds to the life of others and the world. It's life that leads to life, love that leads to love, joy that leads to joy, hope that leads to hope, kindness that leads to kindness,

generosity that leads to generosity, beauty that leads to beauty, and gratitude that leads to gratitude. It does not add to the pain of the world but adds to and enhances life.

Today we are standing in that space of the gate. We are standing at this threshold, a liminal space, neither here nor there. Liminality refers to the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during a transition when a person or group of people is between something that has ended and something else that is not yet ready to begin. Transitions involve separation and letting go, liminality and reorientation. We are in a liminal season as we continue to shelter in place, reflect on this new reality of the pandemic, and move toward being back in our church building and out and about. I will say more about that in the coming weeks. I invite you to remember that the Holy One is with us right here in the gate, in the threshold, in the not knowing.

The One who is the gate and shepherd knows us by name, calls us, loves us, is with us, send us out and calls us back. Amen.

- 1) Rev. Adam Thomas, "The Sheepfold," day1.org
<https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002dad/view>
- 2) Rev. D.Mark Davis, John 10:1-10, leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot
<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/05/figurative-speech-with-twist.html>
- 3) Elisabeth Johnson, Commentary on John 10:1-10, workingpreaching.org
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3244