

Gospel - John 10: 1-10

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sermon 5.3.20

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Good morning, and welcome to the fourth Sunday of the Easter season. For those who haven't ventured in the direction of Saint David's at all, the magnolia tree has faded, the lilacs are now in bloom, the rhodies next door are spectacular and the four of us – Father Steve, Kelsey, Dedrick Allen from Mason Web TV and myself, are back for another Sunday.

It's Shepherd's Sunday. I couldn't keep myself from finding some fluffy white, sheep-like hydrangeas and enfolding them in leaves like a shepherd's cloak up there on the altar. If I had the flower arranging skill, my hydrangea sheep might be cradled instead of surrounded, echoing the beautiful stained glass window in our sanctuary that illustrates the Lord holding a lamb in his arms just as Mary once held the Christ Child.

But this, the fourth Sunday of Easter in Year A of our liturgical journey, would perhaps be better called "Gate Sunday" Gate Sunday doesn't have the same flare, admittedly, but the Gospel today is really focused on the gate more than the shepherd. Today we heard verses 1-10 of the 10th chapter of the gospel according to John. "I am the Good Shepherd" doesn't appear until verse 11. In verses 11-18 we learn how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will lay down his life for us, his sheep.

But today, we pause at the gate. The gate is a pretty important element of a sheepfold, which is a pen or shelter for sheep. More sophisticated sheepfolds in Jesus' day had actual gates. But in remote areas, the gate was really just an opening, and after corralling his flock inside the pen, a shepherd would lie down in the opening to guard the going out and the coming in.

Jesus is the gate. He guards our going out and our coming in.

Not only that, Jesus is THE gate. John didn't write that Jesus claimed to be A gate. Later on, in Chapter 14 of John's gospel, Jesus utters those famous words, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." Through the gate. In today's gospel, Jesus says, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved."

I am not making a case for the one true denomination, or even for the one true religion. Jesus says he is the gate, but that's not a metaphor for, you have to worship this way. Instead, Jesus is saying you're not going to be saved by money, or by technology, or by clothes and shoes and cool cars. Or even by your ability to sing, or enunciate, or come to a physical place called church each Sunday. Those other things are thieves and bandits. They're distractions, or they can certainly become distractions. Strip it all down to the lowest common denominator. Jesus. Is. The. Gate.

You've seen that schtick on cop shows where one guy spends ten minutes of precious time trying to pick the lock, and then his partner discovers that the door's open. It seems pretty simple to just find the gate and enter. So simple, anyone can do it. Anyone.

A couple of years ago I gave the sermon for Shepherd's Sunday. I talked a lot about sheep. After the service, Laurie McClanahan shared a story about a friend of hers who owned sheep. (And Laurie, my apologies if I butcher this story.) Laurie was visiting her friend one week and her friend spent some time gathering up the baby lambs and placing them carefully back in their pen. One by one, she gathered up the escapee lambs and returned them to safety. Unbeknownst to Laurie's friend, there was a hole in the fence and one, by one, these clever little lambs found the hole and escaped again, only to line up next to Laurie's friend and be returned to the pen!

That's quite a metaphor.

I think we can all find our figurative holes in the fence. And maybe we try to hide those holes from the Shepherd. But he knows us. He calls us by name. And he is guarding our going out and our coming in, seeing those holes we use to escape rather than relying on the gate.

“Whoever enters by me will be saved.” Again, the hole in the fence may seem easier, but it’s fraught with peril. There are ragged edges around the hole, things that can snag us and trip us up. But whoever enters by the gate will be saved. Whoever enters by the Gate will go out and come in and find pasture, as the gospel says.

Pasture. Not dry, tasteless hay. Not monotony within a sheepfold. And not earthly riches. Jesus doesn’t use an illustration of gold and gems and dozens of camels to help his disciples understand what they’re signing up for. He uses pastures. Bucolic, fresh smelling, green pastures.

Which brings me to the 23rd psalm.

I don’t know how many sung versions of the 23rd psalm there are. Probably hundreds, maybe thousands. I am confident that Kelsey and I chose the hardest one. I think it would be fair to say that yesterday, as I practiced, I was walking squarely through the valley of the shadow of death. But Kelsey, and God, guided me and I was able to get through David Thompson’s self-published setting of Psalm 23. Quite a challenge for my pandemically-paced brain. . As interesting and challenging as that was, the words of Psalm 23 are so well known, so comforting, I hope you’ll pick up your bulletin, or your Bible, and read through it again this week. We often hear this psalm at funerals and memorial services where it provides familiarity as well as solace. These beloved lines are also an important fixture of Shepherd Sunday. And they are particularly fitting for the world we’re living in. The lord is our shepherd, and though we don’t know when we’ll be able to go to the gym or back to church, though we may be frustrated by the choices our political leaders make and we may not agree on how seriously we are at risk, though we may be scratching our heads about Governor Inslee’s suggestion regarding “drive-in worship services” we do know that our Lord, our shepherd will make us lie down in green pastures, he’ll lead us beside still waters. He revives our souls. His rod and staff are of great, great comfort in these days filled with shadows.

Yes, our Lord leads us to pastures. And to abundance. In the last verse of our gospel, Jesus says, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” The Greek word in this passage is perisson (purr IS sun), which means even more than abundance. Abundance to excess. Extraordinary, extreme abundance. All we can ever need in the metaphoric pasture of eternal life.

Again, it’s an easy choice. We can find a hole in the pen. We can succumb to the thieves and bandits. Or we can take the gate and have extraordinary abundance. So simple. Door number one. It’s always been door number one, the gate. Jesus.

Come to the shepherd. Find pasture. Live abundantly. Amen.