**John 10:1-10** May 3, 2020

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*The full reading of the sermon text will be read in the course of the sermon.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Theme: **“I Am the Gate!”**

 If you grew up in a Christian home, you may have had a picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd somewhere in your house. Maybe even over you bed. Jesus standing head, shoulder and waist above the sheep; staff in one hand, baby lamb in the other. As a child, when you saw that picture you imagined yourself as that little lamb cradled in Jesus’ arm. That is a precious picture of our Savior and us. It conveys the security that we have in Jesus’ powerful arms.

 That picture of Jesus is good. That picture of the flock around him and the lamb in his arm is good. But the background is all wrong. I mean, I like the way all the lush green grass looks, the cloudless day, the feeling of safety, but that background is all wrong. If Jesus had not only been the narrator talking about the Good Shepherd, but also the artist painting the Good Shepherd, if Jesus had painted the parable of the Good Shepherd, he would have painted a very different background.

 To give a truer picture of what Jesus was thinking—and what his audience was hearing—I am going to read you a little excerpt. This is from someone who, well over a hundred years ago, saw shepherds in action in the land of Israel. He saw shepherds still shepherding much as they did in Jesus’ time.

 “In such a landscape as Judea, where a day’s pasture is thinly scattered over an unfenced tract of country, covered with [misleading] paths, frequented by wild beasts, and rolling off into the desert, the shepherd and his character are indispensable. On some high moor, across which at night the hyenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, armed, leaning on his staff, and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why… Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice.”1

 That gives you the sense of security of your childhood picture, but it paints into the background, not the sunshine and rainbows artists like to paint in Good Shepherd pictures, but the predators, the darkness, the danger. This may not be the idyllic picture we prefer. But reality isn’t usually the picture we want to see. It is, however, actually far truer to what was going on in John chapter 10.

 John chapter 10 follows, as you might expect, John chapter 9. But chapter 9 is not just a number, it is the context. Chapter nine helps us understand that when Jesus talked about himself as the Good Shepherd, he really did have a background tinted in danger and darkness.

 The main event of chapter 9 was Jesus healing a man born blind. This amazing miracle utterly frustrated Jesus’ enemies. How could they say that Jesus was a fraud, a madman, or demon possessed when he did things like that!? So Jesus’ enemies, the Pharisees, hounded, not Jesus, but the now healed blind man. They excommunicated him from the Jewish synagogue for little more than being healed by Jesus. Jesus soon heard that the Pharisees had welcomed the blind man into the world of sight by throwing him out of the synagogue. So, like a Good Shepherd, Jesus went and found this crushed man. Jesus told the formerly blind man that he was the Messiah. At which, the blind man bowed at Jesus feet and worshiped. At just this tender moment, the Pharisees burst onto the scene again, criticizing Jesus. It gets me worked up just thinking about it. At just this point of conflict, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Shepherd. (By the way, this is not properly a parable. However, to simplify speaking, I am just going to call it a parable.)

 Indeed, with the Pharisees circling like wolves, having attacked Jesus’ precious sheep, we don’t see a serene rainbow circled Good Shepherd, but a Good Shepherd with fire in his eyes.

 That is the context for Jesus speaking of the Good Shepherd, verses 1-5: ***“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman 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 paints a picture, a parable, about shepherds, sheep, false shepherds, gates and watchmen. You get to the end of that and you wonder, “Some of it I get, but what does it all mean?” Don’t worry, it’s the same question people were thinking the first time Jesus said it. Verse 6: ***“Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.”***

 So, in verses 7 through 10 of our reading, we get part of Jesus’ explanation. Now before I read these verses, I have to clarify one thing. The whole parable is told in verses 1-5, but our reading only gives about 1/3 of the explanation. It focuses on one aspect of it, the focus of the remainder of our sermon: ***“Therefore Jesus said again, ‘I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He 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 to the full.’”***

 Jesus focuses on something I didn’t expect. I thought Jesus was going to say something about being the shepherd, but Jesus says, ***“I am the gate for the sheep.”*** “But I thought Jesus was the Good Shepherd.” Yes, he is. He says so in the verse right after our reading. “But how can he be the Good Shepherd and the gate?” Well, Jesus is telling the parable, so if wants to be both the Shepherd and the Gate, then he is. Right?

 So in verse 7, Jesus is the gate for the sheep. When we picture this gate, don’t think of a welded metal gate, squeaking as it turns on its hinges. The man I quoted earlier about Judean shepherds, he also recounted this:

 I came to one of those folds or enclosures with its opening in the wall. As the shepherd was nearby, I asked him— “Is that a fold for the sheep?” “Oh yes, “ the shepherd replied. “I see only one way in.” “Yes, there it is, there is the door,” replied the shepherd, pointing to the opening in the wall. “But there is no door there…” The shepherd said, “Oh, I am the door.” “What do you mean by calling yourself the door?” To which, quite naturally the shepherd replied, “The sheep go inside, and I come there and lie down across the threshold, and no sheep can get out except over my body, and no wolf can get in except over me.”2

 That adds a new dimension! So when Jesus says, ***“I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep,”*** he really is both shepherd and gate!

 While Jesus as Good Shepherd speaks of his care, Jesus the Gate emphasizes access. ***“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved,”*** verse 9. Then you cross-reference that with earlier verses one and two: ***“The man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.”*** In a subtle way, Jesus is making some very strong claims about himself.

 He is saying something that our world, frankly, vehemently disagrees with. And this is very much the subject of our Bible classes for these weeks. Jesus says that he is the only way to God. You can’t appeal to God through Islam with Mohammed, or Buddhism with Buddha, or Mormonism with Joseph Smith, or any other faith. You can’t do a freestyle faith, picking and choosing what you like from one faith and another. Jesus claims exclusive rights as the gateway to heaven.

 If someone wants to claim that all faiths are more or less the same and they all take you to the same place, leave Jesus out of it. If you want to claim Christianity is merely another expression of what is found in every world religion, then you must be smarter than Jesus, because he doesn’t know anything about that way of thinking. When it comes to the way of salvation, Jesus is not inclusive. He never knew anything of inter-faith gatherings. He is the gate, the only gate to God.

 ***“The man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate***—and remember that Jesus is the gate—***but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber… The thief only comes to steal and kill and destroy.”*** All those other guys are thieves and robbers who come only to steal and kill and destroy. Jesus doesn’t care what you think of their motives. They come to do what they want, not what God wants. You might like the way they dress or talk or whatever, but they come to steal, to slaughter, to destroy.

 We must be careful of all who claim divine authority. Those who make claims about “Faith in God” but do not claim Jesus, we can dismiss them out of hand. They are thieves and robbers who don’t even know how to disguise themselves.

 But some thieves are more clever. Satan’s favorite disguise is half-truth. Some resemble Christ. Some speak the name of Christ, but then totally misrepresent Christ. Not all who come in the name of Christ should be trusted. All must go through Christ. And when they talk of Christ, the core message *must* be what Jesus said, ***“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.”*** Jesus always uses that sort of language with us: ***“Saved.”*** We don’t need a little moral improvement. We don’t need more success and a happier life. We don’t need a cheerleader on the sideline chanting, “You can do it, yes you can!” We need Jesus for salvation from the guilt of our sins and the damnation we deserve.

 We are people, sheep, who love to wander from God’s ways, who cannot look at even a single day of our life and say, “That one day about four years ago, that was the day of my life that God just had to stand back and admire.” No, we have never had a day like that. Not an hour. A quote I recently saw explained it this way: “We don’t become sinners when we fall into sin; we fall into sin because we are sinners.” Like sheep we are too foolish to know the right ways, too weak-willed to correct our ways, too weak to save ourselves. Sheep are apt descriptions of what we are before our God.

 Sometimes in preaching on this analogy with sheep, we pastors so focus on the negatives about sheep (their defenselessness and lack of wits) that we forget one really important thing. In that time and place, the sheep was the most valued animal. Unlike cows, sheep weren’t just for food. They were valued for the wool that clothed the family. Sheep can survive on marginal land where larger livestock can’t. Sheep are more docile and cooperative than goats. I don’t need to go into all the details. Let it be enough to say that in spite of all their deficiencies, sheep were highly valued.

 God values us, not because he needs us, but simply because he has set his affection on us. He wants us saved. He so values us that Christ came and did all the work for us. He did not regret it in the least, but made his rescue mission the theme of his life.

 And so he spoke those most delicious of words, ***“I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.”*** With Jesus in the picture, like a gate, he opens new life to us. It is a life of acceptance by God, for Jesus’ sake. It is freedom from fear of predators and danger and disease because of God’s promise of eternal life. It is a sense of purpose and being treasured while yet in this world. Jesus our Savior is the Gate that opens to all that! Amen.

1 (George Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land,* 1894, as quoted in *Planning Christian Worship – Year A*.)

2 As recorded in Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible*, p.326. (Altered from 3rd to 1st person.)