

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We arrive once again at “Good Shepherd Sunday,” the fourth Sunday of Easter. We are offered an abundance of riches in scripture, because we also have the 23rd Psalm...our favorite ever sung, for sure...**and** the Good Shepherd reading from the gospel, **and** even the reading from Acts, which is as nice an apostolic group hug as was ever written!

This morning, however, our focus is on this portion of John 10. On Jesus as the door or gate of the sheepfold. We have two images of Jesus: one as shepherd and another comparing Jesus to a gate. These two images are within a richly layered, extended metaphor... a long metaphor that speaks of sheep, shepherd, gate, gatekeeper, strangers, thieves, bandits, and wolves. All of these, except for the wolves, are introduced in the first ten verses, and for what reason? They are contribute to understanding who Jesus is, and who we are in relation to him.

First, do you remember the reading from the Fourth Sunday of Lent...where Jesus heals the man blind from birth in John 9? Jesus heals the blind man, and then he and his family are interrogated at such length by the Pharisees to eventually drive him out of the religious community when he will not change his story.

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.

Even though that reading was in a different chapter and also preached weeks ago, there is no break after Jesus’ comments to the Pharisees in 9:41. So, Jesus launches immediately into this discourse about sheep and gates and shepherds. The shepherd discourse, then, interprets the sign that he has enacted in restoring sight to the blind man.

This follows the structural pattern used elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John. It is the pattern of *sign -- dialogue -- discourse*. So, Jesus performs a sign of the blind man’s healing in verses (9: 1-7), which is followed by a dialogue as its onlookers try to figure out what it means (9: 8-39), and concludes with Jesus’ discourse or interpretation of the sign he has performed (9:40-10:18), which includes the verses before us today.

Misunderstanding what Jesus means is a frequent reaction to him, and he typically responds with an invitation toward a deeper level of engagement. Working through the filtered experience of the blind man, let us take the example of Jesus as the door, translated “gate” here because that better fits the pastoral scene.

What does this mean to us? Well, now we enter the interpretation, and understand who Jesus is in the

sight of God. It means that we go further....that assume and draw on the context of the HEALING, using the example of the blind man, because that is exactly to what Jesus is referring in today's ten verses.

Twice Jesus claims, "I AM the gate", which will be the same for the good shepherd in later verses...having the same uniqueness and importance of the "I AM" statements in John's gospel, which began with "I AM the light of the world." Here, the image of the gate draws on the notion of inside and outside first articulated in chapter 9 with the blind man being thrown out and then reiterated in the sheep pen heard today.

The thieves and bandits return as persons. They are like the stranger, whom the sheep do not know and to whom they will not listen. Each of these set of characters: thieves, bandits, and strangers is the counterpoint to Jesus who is known. Jesus repeats "I AM the gate" in verse 9, giving more specificity to what it means that he is the gate for the sheep.

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 from danger, and he provides for their nourishment, for their life in abundance. The sheep, through him being saved, will be able to go in and out and find pasture.

Being saved? So what? As for the healing of the blind man, what is salvation for him? From what did he need to be saved? If we are honest, we need to avoid non-descript definitions of salvation that will not save anybody...hence nobody wants to hear that message today. So, in being specific, with eyes that see and ears that hear, we learn the man blind from birth is saved from isolation and marginalization. His healing saves him from everlasting darkness. Never again will he wonder where his next meal will be or who will answer his pleas as he sits begging outside the city. He will know the safety and security of community, and that the promise of pasture and protection means that the man born blind will know sustenance and security.

It is important to understand that the metaphor of the gate is not one of exclusion, not a license to think of ourselves as Jesus' true sheep and others as outsiders. If we use it that way, we become like the Pharisees who expelled the blind man from their community. The purpose of the gate is not to keep out others. Indeed, Jesus says in verse 16, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Rather, the purpose of the gate is to guard against all that threatens the well-being of the sheep who are inside of the gate.

There are many in our world who seek to steal and kill and destroy. While that may seem obvious,

more often...in our world, our time and place....they are more insidious, more subtle. Perhaps more passive aggressive, but just as damning, if not more. We could spend hours on how the world around us works to further its agenda of drawing distinctions among us, leading to value judgments setting the pecking order in every criteria. How we classify. How our words and actions discourage life. Disapprove of circumstances. Disallow opportunity.

And there are also “wolves in sheep’s or shepherd’s clothing”. For example, there are preachers who proclaim the abundant life that Jesus offers as a life of continual health, wealth, and success. This message often leads to much wealth for the preacher, but deception and despair for those who follow and find that life is still full of struggle.

What, then, is the life in abundance that Jesus promises?

The explanation, the discourse, the clarification for those disciples overhearing these words of Jesus extends beyond the blind man out to every disciple, every believer. The basic needs of life: food, water, shelter, intimacy...are all afforded through Jesus, the tangible grace depicted at verse 18, at the bosom of the Father.

The whole of John’s Gospel is focused on this gift of life. Remember the question asked of Jesus about life after death, and he replied in return by asking the question, “Is there life BEFORE death?” “Life” or “eternal life” in John’s Gospel is more than life after death, but finding that life begins here and now.

Life before death is the transformation of one’s life, moving away from the reduction and subtraction and fear of this world, and moving toward living life. Living life, instead of being scared to death. It comes from knowing the one true God, in following the way that Jesus has lead in becoming the Christ whom God has sent. Listening to the voice of our shepherd. Follow him to those still waters and green pastures, keeping us safe as we walk through those deadly valleys. As we do this, as we pray and break bread together Christ our Lord will do the rest....ensuring that we dwell in the house of God forever.

The good shepherd. The way and the door. The resurrection and the life. The one in whom God was pleased to fully dwell within, the one in whom God is even now fully revealed for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

Praise be to our God: in loving Trinity, now and forevermore, as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit

Amen.