

## **The shepherd of the sheep**

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

### **Text: John 10:2**

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

### **Introduction**

As a preacher I am always on the hunt for the perfect sermon illustration. Ever looking for a story that will help illuminate gospel affirmations. This is one of the reasons church members are hesitant about inviting the minister to their dinner parties; there is that worry that you might become Sunday morning's sermon illustration. And, as most of you know, not all sermon illustrations are equally illustrative. We walk away, on occasion, wondering, "what was that about?" I am comforted to know, on those occasions where the illustration did not illuminate as well as anticipated, that I am in good company. John tells us that when Jesus used this story about 'The shepherd of the sheep', his hearers did not understand what he was saying to them.

Jesus endeavoured to make his point with a second shepherding story where he said, "I am the gate." I am not sure that his hearers were any wiser with the second story; perhaps a little more so because Jesus does a little more unpacking for them. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," he said. So finally, Jesus tells them the point of both illustrations. "I am the good shepherd."

Now a little about context. In reading John chapter 10 verses 1 through 10, as we did today, we are reading a small slice of a much larger story. The point that Jesus makes with his two illustrations—I am the good shepherd—is stated in what we know as verse 11. In fact, the entire story in which these shepherd illustrations are found begins in chapter 9 and goes to the 21<sup>st</sup> verse of chapter 10. These sayings are part of the story of Jesus healing a man who was blind from birth. Jesus' ministry to this man was the source of great controversy. Furthermore, his claim to be the good shepherd did little to mollify the controversy. The story ends this way; "Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'" (John 10:20-21)

Indeed, "why listen to him?" This is the point of the story; this is the reason John tells us this story—to let hearers know why we should listen to him. I invite you to reflect with me on these two illustrations that Jesus used that came from the experience of shepherding sheep—farm illustrations with which his hearers were very familiar.

1. First, a little background on shepherding that will help us understand what Jesus could assume all his hearers knew. In Jesus' day, there were two kinds of sheepfolds. There was the communal sheepfold in the villages and towns. The shepherds keeping their sheep out in the fields by day would bring them back into the village at night, and they would be enfolded in that

sheepfold. It was a place with a strong door, and that door had a doorkeeper. Only the doorkeeper had a key to the door, and no one could enter the sheepfold except a shepherd known by the doorkeeper. That's the kind of fold Jesus was talking about in the first part of our scripture lesson. We will reflect on the second kind of sheepfold in a few moments.

“The one who enters by the gate,” said our Lord, “is the shepherd of the sheep.” Keep in mind the controversy that is swirling around Jesus that erupted because he healed the blind man; the gospel of John says this is the event that prompts Jesus to offer this shepherding illustration. In the wake of this miracle, “some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided.” The question is about Jesus’ identity; is he from God or not?

It seems odd to us that first century people would reject Jesus because of the day of the week he healed someone of a dreaded medical condition. People today reject Jesus for reasons that may have sounded odd to first century people. If he were truly from God, some say, he would do something about earthquakes and famines and diseases—namely, not let them happen or at least exempt us from all consequences. Or from our 21<sup>st</sup> century presumed all-knowing perch, we say that these miracle stories are myths told to illustrate some spiritual truth, rendering mute the discussion about whether Jesus is from God or not. For others, in this story, the marvel that this man, blind from birth, now has his sight stops them long enough to consider that there may be more to Jesus than they first thought.

Jesus begins his illustration talking about thieves and bandits. Shepherds may not be common in our era, but thieves and bandits are quite common. “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.” In other words, those who climb in by another way are not there for the good of the sheep. Someone who breaks the widow at the back of your house in order to get in, isn’t likely there to deliver something for your benefit.

On the contrary, continued Jesus, “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.” The shepherd is the one who comes to the sheepfold to do good for his sheep. He is the one who will call them out in order to care for them. Jesus is claiming that he is the true shepherd of the sheep. The blind man has sight. Clearly Jesus wants good for him. This is the reason the man is following him.

Every person listening to Jesus that day, and many of us hearing it again today, knew by heart the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.” They all know that the true shepherd comes to do good for his sheep. This is what the Psalmist is declaring about God as his shepherd. God is the good shepherd. And when the shepherd came for his sheep, they follow his voice willingly. If only we were as wise as sheep! The root of sin in the garden story in Genesis is that we humans doubt the goodness of God. We doubt that the true shepherd wants our good.

We can observe some other interesting things about the shepherd with whom Jesus identifies himself. First, this shepherd has the well-being of the sheep at heart, rather than his own well-being. This shepherd is neither thief nor bandit who would steal sheep, a profoundly anti-social

act and one in which the sheep would come to no good end. Jesus emphasizes a particular difference between the bandit and shepherd; the shepherd enters rightly, properly, and openly into the sheepfold. It is appropriate for him to come and call his sheep and he does so, through the door consistently. All is open and above board, a cooperative effort with an obliging doorkeeper and sheep who respond to the sound of their name. There is a relationship of trust among all parties here.

The people listening did not understand what Jesus was saying to them. When Jesus clarified his point saying, “I am the good shepherd,” it was much clearer for them. These “I am” statements by Jesus, sprinkled throughout John’s gospel, call to mind the story in Exodus where God identifies God’s self to Moses as the great “I am.” (Exodus 3:14) There is no mistaking what Jesus means to imply. He is God come among us and has legitimate claim over the sheep. And he comes to do good for us. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

Sometimes the reason it is hard to hear what Jesus has to say is because Jesus’ mission and society’s values are far apart. In a secular age it may seem necessary to translate the church’s native God-talk into more legible language; communicating in a way your neighbours understand is a very simple way to love them. The risk, beyond forgetting our native language even among ourselves, is communicating the opposite of what we intend.

Take, for example, the emphasis that many place on the church as community. The temptation is to speak of the church as a voluntary organization like any other, whose “member benefits” are like those of similar groups. With the ubiquitous caveat: like others, only better—deeper, richer, more lasting, more fulfilling. Community, family, belonging, devotion, mutual care, neighbour love, social justice, spiritual practice, contemplation; the desire for such goods is common to all, including the nones (those claiming no religion). In order to connect with people the church says, we have all that and more. The truth is that the Christian church is not distinguished by its possession or mastery of such things. Competing for consumers in a marketplace of personal fulfillment is a fool’s errand. It corrupts the church’s mission at the source.

Yes, the church is a community of people. Yes, and it is important that we care for one another and grow in love for one another. What distinguishes the church from other communities? In short, God. God, the one God of Christian confession, the living God who raised Israel’s Messiah from the dead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Triune Lord proclaimed by the good news about Jesus: Jesus is the one who makes the church the church, which is to say a community unlike any other in the world. Our mission is to bear witness to him. “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd.”

2. But there was a second kind of sheepfold. During the warm season, the shepherds would take the sheep far, far away from the villages. They would stay gone for weeks at a time, and at night they would enclose the sheep in folds that were built out on the hillside. Those folds were simply walls enclosing a space, with an entrance. There was no door to that entrance, and once the shepherd had put his sheep in the fold for the night, he himself would lay down across the opening. So there is a sense in which the good shepherd was the door, the gate. And for the sheep to enter or depart from the sheepfold, they had to pass over the shepherd’s body. It was that kind of sheepfold that Jesus was talking about when he referred to himself as the gate.

When Jesus said “I am the gate” everyone listening has the image in their mind of the shepherd laying across the door at night to keep the sheep secure from wandering away and to keep the sheep safe from predators out to harm the sheep. Jesus will clarify this point, with regard to himself, as he goes on to say, “the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” As the believer stands at the foot of the cross, she always knows that her good is always our Saviour’s objective.

With this image of Jesus as the gate in the imaginations of his hearers, Jesus goes on to say, “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.”

I wonder what Jesus might have had in mind when he speaks about thieves that destroy life. I realize in the shepherd story he talks about sheep stealers. Jesus comes to give life and we humans are prone to trust things we think give life but, in the end, may, in fact, steal life. One of the things Jesus warned against was trusting wealth to give us life. Jesus said “you cannot serve God and wealth.” “Store up treasures in heaven not on earth.” And yet the money is ever so tempting to us.

During the corona virus pandemic an [article](#) in the March 3<sup>rd</sup> financial pages of the U.K.’s Daily Telegraph by Jeremy Warner sated; “Not to put too fine a point on it, from an entirely disinterested economic perspective, the COVID-19 might even prove mildly beneficial in the long term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents.” Is this “disinterested economic perspective” life giving? Still, the money is ever so tempting for us.

Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” When the Apostle John preached this message, he does so because he found in Jesus that this was true—Jesus gave life in a way nothing else he found in life could. John found that Jesus was the life-giving water that quenched the profoundest human thirst, as Jesus had promised the woman at the well. And John said this, not from the perch of wealth and ease, but in the midst of persecution and the deprivation such persecution entails.

Jesus gives life eternally; eternal life that begins here and now and will be forever. The lie of wealth is that you should pile up everything you can here and now because this life is all there is. When pandemic strikes it is prudent to take appropriate steps to treasure the life God has given us. Life is a gift of God and we ought to treasure God’s gifts. But there is more to say here. I say this to you gently, but forthrightly, some disease will close out our earthly existence. Our mortality is not in question. Emergency preparedness has importance but of far greater importance is to be prepared for our dying. A faith relationship with the great Shepherd of the sheep is how we prepare. To know Jesus is to know the One who is life and because his life is eternal, being joined to him in faith is to receive the promise of eternal life.

“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep,” said our Lord, “Whoever enters by me will be saved... I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”