

OH THE PLACES WE WILL GO
JOHN 10: 1-10
MAY 3, 2020
EASTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I am! I am the gate, says Jesus, and through me sheep are offered the only way in and out of the sheepfold. That is how a shepherd cares his flock, and I am the Good Shepherd.

Like any good storyteller, and Jesus was a good one, connecting people to what is familiar is crucial for understanding. Sheep, mentioned 200 plus times in scripture, qualifies them for familiar. They were providers of essentials like wool, milk, and meat. Symbolically they served as God's people. So, Jesus' audience knew the value of sheep and shepherds. They knew about bandits and thieves; and they knew gates were designed to keep these no-gooders away from the woolly grass-grazers. While the sheep pen was a good gathering place, without the watchful eye of a caring shepherd, opening and closing the gate, sheep can wander out and thieves can wander in.

Before I go any further, let me get this out of the way. Four-legged balls of wool and two-legged, upright creatures are not inherently bad, but bad choices often lead down paths of trouble. But seriously, does Jesus have to call us sheep? Well, actually yes because...we are sheep-like!

Humans tend to seek out greener pastures, risk or not. Too often we allow distractions to lead us to aimless following and too many times, with our repetitive nature has us repeating our mistakes, learning nothing from them. Physically we may know how to self-protect ourselves better than a bunch of sheep, but how well do we fare against temptations of the mind, body and spirit--those evil choices disguised as good? How often can we actually save ourselves without the help of the one who promises to deliver us from evil and lead us not into temptation's path?

On a positive note, we are trainable. We have the ability to follow, particularly when we hear our names called out by a recognizable voice. However, having the ability to follow and following through are two different things. Often, we are inclined to follow the voices that sound like us and not the distinctive voice of the Good Shepherd who knows our name and knows us intimately. And, like sheep, we have good memories, and should walk away from voices not concerned about

our best and walk toward the voice that reminds us we are an important part of the flock-worthy, loved, protected.

We humans tend to flock together with our own kind for safety and socializing and comfort. We keep our eyes open hoping to keep away from the ones seeking to cause them harm. And in our flocking mode, we like to think of ourselves as being clean, but the truth of the matter is our human sinful selves are sometimes as dirty as the matted, nasty wool falling in clumps when adult sheep get sheared.

And last, but not least, we like sheep, often find it more interesting to zig and zap when we walk. Like the 300-degree visual boundaries of a sheep, dodging here and darting there does away with that boring straight-line walk. The added benefit is being able to see what lies behind. While that is not necessarily baaaadd, it sure keeps us from focusing on what lies ahead. Backward glancing robs us of the full view of the good God is putting before us! Looking forward focuses our eyes on the open gate and the safety that rests within it rather than the danger that lurks beyond.

So, there we have it. These things we know about sheep. These things Jesus knows about us. And yes, we are like sheep who go astray, and yet, dirty and smelly, wandering and weak and stubborn as we can be, we are God's sheep and Jesus is our Good Shepherd.

But what exactly led Jesus to talk about sheep, shepherds, sheepfolds, gates, thieves and bandits in the first place? Here is where context makes a story all the richer.

Having performed one of his many miracles, Jesus has provided fodder for his enemies, the religious leaders. Jesus is also aware his followers could stand some spiritual eye and ear updates. Jesus is all about giving every opportunity to know where he is and where he wants us to go. Like a shepherd, Jesus never gets so far ahead of us that we cannot see or hear. But we must be looking and listening!

Listening, minus the gift of sight, is where we found Jesus before he tells this story. He had restored sight to the man born blind, and with eyes and heart wide open, that man declares Jesus to be the Son of God. To many of Jesus' followers, he is simply a prophet and the Pharisees, blinded by religious rituals cannot see the miracle of one once blind, now seeing. Then, enter Jesus telling the story of the Good Shepherd, unraveling it for all to understand.

The good-intentioned religious leaders are in essence thieves, standing in the way of safety and green pastures, keeping all from the best and abundant living. Trying to sneak into the sheep pen instead of entering through the gate is akin to robbing the hope of salvation for God's people. In the Pharisee's eyes he can never be the Gate because he will never be their Messiah.

Enter the hired hands into the story. If sheep tend to wander, then hired hand tend to not wander far enough to really keep up or care for the sheep. It is the shepherd who keeps watch over the flock by night. It is the Good Shepherd who is willing to give his life to find and save his flock, even it that is just one lost sheep. And Jesus could not be any more specific: I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Gate.

But Jesus is not the typical gate that seeks to restrain or zap freedom. Behind the gate are those things that Jesus promises to protect...and that includes us, dirty and matted, clean and sheared. We are God's sheep and Jesus has promised to give us freedom, but in that freedom also promises to watch over, care for and protect us. In that freedom, Jesus does not choose the in and out crowd. He offers instead a safe space for those who recognize and follow his voice as the one who says: Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.

Anna Carter Florence, author, preacher and seminary professor, puts it this way: *We go out and we come in even when we are saved. The gate marks a place to rest and a place to graze. The rhythm of in and out is necessary to life because the green pastures are outside the gate; a sheep that flat out refuses to go out will die. Likewise, a sheep that flat-out refuses to go in, when the call comes, may soon be lost in the night. So, the gate is part of life and key to life, but not because it keeps us out or in. It simply marks the boundary between what we are to do in each space. The secret of saving the life of a sheep is to know when it is time to go out and when it is time to come back in. The point is to listen to the voice of the shepherd—the voice you recognize above all others—and follow that call.*

I imagine Jesus standing near the many gates of our lives singing: come ye sheep, nasty and needy, weak and wounded, lost and lame. Jesus ready, stands to save you, full of pity, love and power!

That is why Jesus is the Gate. He is the one true place designed to be the entry into the sheepfold. Entering through the gate we find a safe place to be nourished, to be nurtured, to find rest, to be saved. And in a world, such as ours, this sounds like a mighty good place to be.

Jesus calls us to come and rest. But he also calls us to go out, sheep with a purpose. From that place of rest and restoration, Jesus calls us to go out into the world and proclaim the Good News of needed green pastures and still waters. We are called to share the comforting Good News that dark valleys can be navigated, and paths can lead us to good places. We are called to be the voice of the Good Shepherd inviting others to sit at table with us, even our enemies, inviting them to experience God's overflowing blessings. We are to shout out that goodness and mercy stick with us throughout our earthly lives and then follow us to that heavenly house, that sheepfold, that has been lovingly prepared for us throughout the entirety of our lives. We are called to be the voice of the Good Shepherd, sharing the Good News that there is a place of provision where there is always enough!

After rest and restoration, oh the places we will go, with the reassuring confidence that bandits and thieves and wolves can never rob us of the hope with have in everlasting and abundant life in Jesus, the Gate, Jesus, the Good Shepherd!

As we make our way to the Lord's Table in all of our settings, it is good and right that with full thanksgiving we practice listening, looking for, and following that straight line that leads us all, individually and communally to the Gate where we find rest and peace and hope-- prepared to face, with gratitude, yet another day of abundant living that the Lord has gifted us! Amen