

**Isaiah 55:1-9** <sup>1</sup>Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. <sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. <sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. <sup>4</sup> See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. <sup>5</sup> See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. <sup>6</sup> Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; <sup>7</sup> let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. <sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. <sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

**John 10:1-10** <sup>1</sup>“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. <sup>2</sup> The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” <sup>6</sup> Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. <sup>7</sup> So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Isaiah 55:1-9 and John 10:1-10  
03/24/19 – Saginaw First U.M.C.  
“I AM the Gate for the Sheep”  
Rev. Amy Terhune

If you're anything like me, you probably don't spend a lot of time thinking about gates. They're useful for getting the lawnmower from the front yard to the backyard, but I experience a major headache if the gate is left open when I let the dogs out into backyard. The little one usually stays put, but the big guy will run. Fences keep my dogs in and other dogs out, but gates give the humans an access point. At the airport, gates are where we go to arrive and depart our planes. If you drive west, you'll eventually get to St. Louis, Missouri, but long before you can see the city, you'll see the graceful silhouette of the St. Louis Arch rising on the horizon – a powerful symbol of the gateway to the west. And if you're ever lucky enough to get all the way to the west, you may have opportunity to cross the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco, so named because it spans the deep threshold between the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean. A locked gate says stay out. An open gate says come in. Gates can evoke so many different images and responses.

As we continue our journey through the I AM statements of Jesus in John's Gospel, we hear Jesus say, “I AM the Gate for the sheep.” He says this in a conversation he is having with Scribes and Pharisees after healing a man born blind in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of John just before our lesson for today. Jesus heals this blind man on the Sabbath, and the religious authorities aren't too happy about it because it breaks the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, and on it, shall you rest...” Healing is

work, apparently. When the blind man finally gets fed up with all the questioning, he says to the scribes and the Pharisees: "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes! If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. (John 9:30, 33-34)

They drive him out. They've made a determination about who's in and who's not. Now that would have really resonated with John's community because they're struggling. They have been born and raised as Jews, like Jesus. They celebrate the Passover, they remember the sabbath and keep it holy, they are covenant people. But because they have come to know Jesus as their messiah, they have been ostracized from the community, perhaps even from their own families, and they've been cast out of the synagogue. They can't worship their anymore. What's worse, some of their own friends, neighbors, countrymen have betrayed them and done real and lasting harm – destroying businesses, homes, reputations, jailing, even killing. John's community is in crisis. And so John recalls words and images from Jesus that give them a sense of how to hold together through such difficult times. John reminds them of their worth, their preciousness to God. You are sheep, and you belong to shepherd who loves you.

The image of Jesus as a shepherd has a powerful hold on the Christian imagination. The good shepherd has inspired more paintings, more music, and frankly, more church lingo than most people realize. The very fact that I am called a pastor, and that my care for the congregation is called pastoral care reveals the influence. Behind that terminology is an understanding of shepherding as Jesus shepherds – guiding, caring, defending, and so forth. I like that image, although the reality is that I function more like a sheepdog for the good shepherd than anything. The shepherd takes the lead. I imitate – laughably, sometimes.

But as we make our way through the I AM statements of Jesus in John's gospel, there is one statement that tends to get lost in the shadow Jesus' powerful image of "I AM the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep." We're going to hear more about the Good Shepherd next week. This week, Jesus teaches: "I AM the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. 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."

That's a powerful image. To those scribes and Pharisees who want to drive out anyone who doesn't meet their standards, Jesus response is: "I am the gate for the sheep." Not you. People matter more than rules. I will be the one who decides who matters.

I can't tell you how many of my colleagues in ministry have picked up on the phrase: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved..." and have used that phrase to talk about who is saved and who isn't. And by saved, they're often referring to who gets into heaven, and who doesn't. But it seems to me that in order to have that conversation, I would need to make judgements about other people, and I'm not comfortable doing that because I really can't know what is happening inside another's heart or soul. Not wanting to place myself in the company of the scribes and Pharisees in John 9, I'll leave that to God.

And really, if we look at Jesus' words, "I AM the Gate for the sheep", it is worth noting that Jesus is not a padlocked gate, and no sheep are left outside. When Jesus says, "I AM the gate", he's not referencing his relationship to God. He's not the gate for the Lord. No, he is the gate for the sheep. Jesus is referencing his relationship to us. The gate image is for Christians who follow Jesus, who take our identity from Jesus. Furthermore, we define our sanctuary and our mission by who Jesus is. We come in and go out through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the entry point and the sending point. There is a rhythm to our faith in The One who is the Gate.

Let's talk first about Jesus as our entry point, the one who calls us in to relationship with him. The one keeps us safe from thieves and bandits in the night.

Now, in order to understand what Jesus means when he says "I AM the Gate," you need to know about shepherding in ancient Israel. Sheepfolds in Israel were nearly always circular enclosures constructed from rock with bramble or spikey thickets along the top so that wolves couldn't climb in. Sometimes, a bunch of shepherds would work together. There would be a sizeable sheepfold where several flocks would be housed overnight, and the shepherds would build a fire in front of the entrance and take turns keeping watch in the night while the others slept around the fire. In the morning each shepherd would make his distinctive call and his sheep would separate from the others and follow him because they recognized his call. He would lead them out to pasture for the day and then meet up with his fellow shepherds again at night and all the sheep would go back into the fold together. Jesus uses that image. The sheep know my voice, he says.

The other thing worth noting is that most of the sheepfolds didn't have a gate on hinges. The shepherd was the gate. The shepherd would light a fire right there and lay down in the doorway of the sheepfold. Nothing got in or out except by crawling over the shepherd. Jesus uses that image most profoundly today. "I am the gate." In other words, Jesus literally lays his body down between the sheep and all that would destroy them. In the night, the shepherd is their protection.

That is an image I wrestle with, because I really things to be that simple. I want God to protect faithful people from pain, from suffering, from death, from harm. But this is now my 20<sup>th</sup> year in ministry and reality does not bear out that wish. I've stood at too many bedsides, gravesides, and prison cells to stand here and proclaim that all who believe will be protected and safe. When we talk about Christ as the entry-point, the one who calls us in from the world when darkness is closing in, we're talking about one who calls us to him. Jesus does not protect me from suffering, pain, death, or physical harm. Life isn't safe. What Jesus does do, however, is protect me from meaninglessness, from worthlessness, from sin. My body will die, sooner or later, but my soul doesn't have to. In the darkest times, I experience Jesus' protection in his loving presence.

Many of you know that I lost my mom two and a half years ago. It's hard to believe it's been that long. I will never again hear her voice, feel her touch, see her smile. Nobody could protect her from the cancer that slowly took over her lungs, her brain, her body. And when my daughter Cathy dances, or my daughter Izzy is on stage, or something is going on that I know she would have wanted to experience, I feel the ache of the loss in my chest, you know? I miss her. God doesn't protect me from that pain. But then I think to myself: Would I want God to protect me from that? What if I didn't feel it? What if she died, and I felt nothing? What if I just forgot, went on, erased her from my memory? There's nothing about that which I find appealing. But in fact, my mother's love for me is as real as I am. It exists completely independently of her physical presence. I know it. I experience it. It goes with me. In the night, in the sheepfold, Jesus lays himself across the chasm and I am protected from disconnectedness, from forgetfulness, from despair. Jesus lays down his life to prove and to protect the power of love.

Jesus is the gate. He keeps out the thieves and the bandits. They must be the bad guys, but who are they exactly, you ask? And it's a good question because Jesus has a way of turning everything on its ear. We know that he ate with sinners and tax-collectors, which would have included thieves and bandits. And we know that when Jesus was crucified on the cross, he promised a thief being crucified with him that today they'd be together in paradise. So the problem isn't thieves and bandits like we think of thieves and bandits, because Jesus isn't really the slightest bit concerned with stuff and who gets it. Jesus is concerned with people, and the bad guys to Jesus—the ones who are really thieves and bandits—are the ones who are out to steal our humanity, our hearts, our souls. There are powers in this world that have a stake in convincing us that suffering is meaningless, that love is powerless, that grace is useless, that we ourselves and the relationships that carry us don't matter. There are powers with a vested interest in encouraging in us a feeling of disconnectedness, to forget about those beyond ourselves, to give up on hoping for a world that isn't so full of suffering, fear, or divisiveness. Those forces exist.

“Several years back, a movie came out called “The Bear” in which a little orphaned bear cub encounters a giant male black bear. The larger bear peered around and seemed to realize that the mother bear wasn't anywhere to be found, that the little guy is all on his own, and in an extraordinary act of compassion for the animal world, he sort of adopts this baby bear. Papa bear proceeded to show the cub how to grub for insects and how to catch fish and how to scratch his back against a tree.

“One day the two bears become separated. The cub begins to cry and looked frantically for his new father, but can't find him anywhere. The cub approaches a stream where he'd learned to fish and something catches his attention – a mountain lion ready to pounce. That same mountain lion had stalked the cub for the entire show. There was no way that mountain lion would've gone for that cub with Papa bear around, but now....

“The camera zooms in on the cub. He automatically mimicked the posture of his adopted father when threatened. He stood on his hind legs and bared his teeth. Then, in exactly the same way his new father would have done, this cub let loose a mighty growl that should have reverberated throughout the forest. But, instead, only a tiny bear cub squeak comes out.

“But in spite of that, and to everybody's astonishment, the mountain lion lowers his head and runs off in the opposite direction! That's when the camera pans back to the proud little cub still standing tall on his hind legs. And then all the viewers see what that little cub could not: a few yards behind him, at full, ferocious height, his sharp, white teeth bared in a snarl, stands Daddy bear. Even though the cub couldn't see his father, his father stood guard, protecting his young. The little cub had power available greater than anything he could produce on his own. There was a greater power watching over him. [4 ¶s adapted from illustrations on protection from ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., by Billy D. Strayhorn, [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com).]

And the same is true for us. There is a greater power available to us. Jesus doesn't isolate us from life – Jesus gives us the power to overcome the suffering, the pain, the fear, the losses that threaten to steal our humanity. When I give Jesus charge of the gates to my mind and my heart, he opens them to those around me who are suffering or needy, and closes them to those who try to feed my selfishness or placate my hunger for holiness.

But Jesus is also my sending point. As surely as the love he authors and engenders within me is my sanctuary in a dark world, he is also my mission beyond myself. I take that love with me. The gate swings both directions. The one who invites me in also leads me out.

As I was thinking about our mission and this gate image this week, I came across some words from a colleague of mine, the Rev. Kim James. She read a story in the newspaper that caught her attention. It seems that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has sponsored a competition to see who can develop the best toilet "for the 2.6 billion people around the world who don't have access to modern sanitation." The rules of the competition are these: "the world's next toilet . . . must operate without water, electricity, or a septic system." It must "not discharge pollutants," it will "preferably capture energy or other resources," and it will "operate at a cost of 5 cents a day." The project's importance comes from the fact that "about 1.5 million children die each year from diarrheal disease" and "about half the hospitalizations in the developing world" are "caused by unsafe sanitation." The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation dedicated \$42 million dollars to this project because they want to improve and save lives.

There are a lot of different kinds of gates in our world. Some exclude and condemn. But the best gates are the ones like Jesus, who open up the possibility for healing and hope. [2 ¶s from Donna Gordon Blankinship, AP, "Turning pollution into cash," *The Pueblo Chieftain*, August 15, 2012, 5A; as used in "I Am the Gate" by Rev. Kim James, 8/19/12, <http://wesleyumcpueblo.org/subpages/I-Am-The-Gate.pdf>.]

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." That's what he meant when he said, "I am the gate." Thanks be to God. Amen.