

Psalm 23 ¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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

Psalm 23 and John 10:1-10

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"The Gate"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Not long after we first moved up to Hancock in the U.P. in 2009, I ran over the grocery store on a cloudy gray day to do the weekly shopping. I accidentally left my headlights on, and it drained the battery while I was in the store. When I came out to my car, there was a guy lounging against his pickup truck in the spot next mine. I knew him – he was from the Hancock church, and he had recognized my car, noticed that I left my lights on, suspected my battery might be drained, and was kindly waiting there with his jumper cables already hooked up ready to jump start my car. As you might expect, I was deeply grateful. As he was hooking up the jumper cables to my car, he noted casually that if I hadn't locked my doors, he'd have been able to open the car door and turn the lights off, and save us both the trouble. Which was culture shock for me. Having grown up in metro Detroit, then Ann Arbor, Boston, Port Huron, and the greater Flint area, it had been ingrained into me since I could open a car door that locking them was a standard safety measure. The idea of not locking my car doors was utterly preposterous to me. "Robberies don't happen much up here," he told me. Which, statistically, is in fact true, but I never did get out of the habit of locking my doors.

A few years later, I got a call one morning from a couple in my church, both in their 80s by that time, married at least some sixty years. It seems that the night before, someone had come into their house and stolen pills. Didn't take money or stuff – just pain pills that would sell on the street. The kicker was that they didn't lock their doors. They'd never locked their doors. Eighty years in the copper country, and they'd never been robbed. Nobody they knew had ever been robbed. So the bandit just walked in while they were sleeping and wiped out their medicine cabinet. The insurance company quickly got them more meds. But that was never the issue. It was the vulnerability, the fear,

the disillusionment. The hometown they loved, the place that had cared for them for decades had suddenly been proven unsafe, and they felt betrayed. Their sense of safety and trust was compromised, and they were grieving. Until I counseled them that morning, I had never seen first-hand what that sense of being violated does to the soul and the mind and the heart. Being persons of deep faith, they counted their blessings. They were unharmed. Nothing they truly valued was taken. Neighbors and loved ones rallied around them, took steps to help make them safer. But they were never the same after that; never could regain the security and trust that was lost.

I am nearly positive that Jesus understands what that feels like. Jesus knows there are thieves and bandits in the world – forces that rob us of our trust, our hope, our connectedness, our basic humanity; forces bent on leading us to believe that suffering is meaningless, that love is powerless, that grace is useless, that we ourselves and the relationships that carry us don't matter. And he has a response to that. It's found here in the beginning of the 10th chapter of John's gospel.

But let's put things in context. Remember with me what's happening in John 9, immediately prior to the lesson for this morning. I preached on it about a month ago, and Rob Ashmall referenced it again a couple of weeks ago. Jesus restores sight for a man born blind. This healing just so happens to fall on the Sabbath day, and the religious authorities aren't too happy about it because it breaks the 4th 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, using ancient images from their own faith's psalms and prophets. 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 in today's lesson, Jesus describes himself as the gate, and not without reason. To those scribes and Pharisees who want to drive out the blind man and 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.

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 and our hope for a world that isn't so full of suffering, fear, or divisiveness.

When I hear Jesus tell me that he's the gate for the sheep, I take that to mean that Jesus is the one who keeps me. Life isn't safe. It never has been. Like the older couple forever changed by thieves and bandits, all of us are subject to the hardships of life. There's a part of me that wishes that I could count on Jesus to save me from illness, accident, loss, or trauma. But reality is that these things are part of the human condition. And for all the pain that comes with loss, I wouldn't want to not feel grief for those I love that have died. I wouldn't want to not feel anger for the injustices of the world. I wouldn't want to live isolated and unconnected in order to save myself from the risk of betrayal, lies, or heartbreak. For all of the world's ills, I would not choose apathy or meaninglessness or disinterest. I trust Jesus, not to keep me safe, but to keep me whole; centered, compassionate. I trust Jesus to keep me me – to safeguard the essential part of my soul created in God's image. I trust Jesus to go before me; to inspire my courage, to buoy my hope, to undergird my love. And I trust Jesus to extend grace when I fail to be who God calls me to be. This is the metal of my faith.

But the gate swings outward as well as in. 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. 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.

There's a reason that Jesus talks about sheep instead of cows or camels. Sheep understand themselves as part of a herd. They know they need one another. A sheep on its own will bleat and panic. It needs the others. Human beings are not quite that desperate. But the truth is that sometimes we don't want to show how much we need each other.

King Duncan tells a beautiful story about "...a man who stopped at a convenience store one day to get a newspaper. He noticed that the owner of the store had tears in his eyes and kept looking out the window, so he asked what was going on.

“The store owner said, “Do you see that bus bench over there? There’s a woman who comes there every day around this time. She sits there for about an hour, knitting and waiting. Buses come and go, but she never gets on one and no one ever gets off for her to meet. I feel for her. It was cold the other day, so I carried a cup of coffee out to her and sat with her for a while.

“Her only son lives a long way away. She last saw him two years ago, when he boarded one of the buses right there. He is married now, and she has never met her daughter-in-law or seen their new child. She told me, ‘It helps to come here and wait. I pray for them as I knit little things for the baby, and I imagine them in their tiny apartment, saving money to come home. I can’t wait to see them.’”

“The reason the owner was looking out the window at that particular moment was that the three of them—the son, his wife and their infant child—were just getting off the bus. The look on the woman’s face when this small family fell into her arms was one of pure joy. And this joy only increased when she looked into the face of her grandchild for the first time. The store owner commented, “I’ll never forget that look as long as I live.”

“The next day, the same customer returned to the convenience store. The owner was again behind the counter. Before the store owner could say or do anything, the customer said, “You sent her son the money for the bus tickets, didn’t you?”

“The store owner looked back with eyes full of love and a smile and replied, “Yes, I found out his name, I found him on facebook, I sent the money.” Then he repeated his statement from the day before, “I’ll never forget that look as long as I live.” And as he gazed on the window, remembering the happy reunion, it was obvious to all that this man had discovered a measure of the abundant life. [6 ¶s adapted from illustrations for John 10:1-21, www.sermons.com.]

When Jesus talks about abundant life, he’s not talking about a long life (as in a large amount of years) and he’s not talking about a luxurious life (as in, a large amount of stuff). He’s talking about a well-resourced spiritual life. He’s talking about the gifts that give life meaning, value, and purpose. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly. The truth is that we are vulnerable. We are not in control. We are not invincible. And we will forever face risk, pain, death. But these are not the things that define us. We are sheep that belong to the Good Shepherd. And Jesus is the gate that holds the best of who we are. 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 in us and through us the possibility for growth and healing and hope. And that is my prayer for all of us. Amen.