

I Am the Gate and Shepherd

Third in Lenten Series: Who Do You Say I Am?

by

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John 10:1-11

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. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

If I learned one thing beyond a fairly serious education on good grammar from my ninth grade English teacher, it was that you do not mix metaphors. I actually remember exactly how Mrs. Newell taught us not to mix metaphors. She pulled out Carl Sandburg's famous poem and said, if "*The fog comes on little cat feet,*" then cannot at the same time weigh upon us like a heavy blanket. It is either a cat or a blanket, but never both.

Apparently, Jesus did not have Mrs. Newell for high school English, because here we have one lesson in which he says he is both, the gate to the sheepfold, and the shepherd. So let me cut to the chase, and free this chapter of John's gospel from Mrs. Newell's red ink.

It was not unusual for shepherds to lead their flocks into a sheepfold for the night. These low-walled enclosures had one entry way. As opposed to having a swinging gate like we might have in our backyard fences, the shepherd himself would often lie down across the pen's open access at night. The Shepherd literally became the gate – the one who would wake up to keep thieves and wolves out, the one whose own body, whose own life even was at risk in protecting the fold.

When Jesus says, "I am the Gate," he declares that he is the means by which the sheep enter the safety of the sheep fold, and as their Shepherd he is also the One who leads them out. The Shepherd uses a crook to guide them. The curved end could draw a sheep away from danger. The blunt end could prod them toward places they would rather not go. As Gate and Shepherd, he both protects and prods, he secures and agitates as needed. He also puts his own life on the line for the sheep whose lives depend on his, which is why this text is a good one to ponder as we journey through Lent on our way to the cross.

I know these sheep lessons are foreign to our more urban existence, however the pastoral images of God as a shepherd, and of the church as a flock to be tended, remain powerful symbols in our religious psyche. These metaphors recall the comforting assurances of

Psalm 23: “I shall not want... He restoreth my soul... I will fear no evil... My cup runneth over...” Add to these evocative images, Jesus’ story about the shepherd, who at great peril, goes out of the way to find and carry home that one lost sheep, and we are hooked on these rural and rustic metaphors despite our distance from the daily drudgery of real-life shepherds.

However, our comfortable familiarity with these biblical pastures, may mean we can lose hold of the full measure of their power. To imagine God gathering us into a sheepfold does affirm God’s caring presence in our lives, but never apart from the sheer danger that lurks in all the shepherding passages of scripture. They are not serenely pastoral like a picnic in the park; indeed, this passage alone warns of thieves and bandits and strangers who try to lure the sheep away from the One to whom they belong.

Along with the Psalm, today’s text references Ezekiel 34 and its condemnation of ancient Israel’s kings who had become corrupt shepherds: *Prophecy against the shepherds of Israel...* God told Ezekiel: *who have been feeding themselves. Should not shepherds feed the sheep?... You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost but with force and harshness you have ruled them.*

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann reminds us that shepherding images might suggest an idyllic pastoral scene, but the truth is the term “shepherd” in the Bible is always political. And by “political” what he means is the image is always related to the public, corporate care of the most vulnerable in a society.¹ So these pastoral titles for Jesus as gate and shepherd then are not about an individualistic notion of “My God and me;” but rather about our God and all of God’s children, and how that includes us. Further, when Jesus says, that “whoever enters

¹ Matt Rich, *Trying to Say What is True*, p. 57.

by me will be saved,” these words are an invitation, not meant to exclude. Because later in this very same chapter Jesus will go on to say, “I lay down my life for the sheep... I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.”² So when we hear Jesus say: “I am the Gate to the sheepfold,” and “I am the Good Shepherd” we know we are both blessed by his self-sacrificing protection which gives us life, and by his leading us out into the world of his many flocks which gives our lives meaning.

A few members of our congregation made sure that I saw the article by Ruth Graham entitled, “Christian Prophets Are on the Rise. What Happens When They’re Wrong?” Within growing corners of American Christianity there are charismatic leaders rising up and declaring themselves modern day prophets. The problem is their so-called prophecy is all tied up with the divisive political and culture wars of our time. One young self-described prophet with a large and loyal following uses social media to proliferate his predictions about a wide range of topics from the pandemic, the makeup of the Supreme Court, last year’s national election, and the possibility of a spiritual revival in America that is all about a very exclusive world-view of who is inside the gate and who is not.

This past year, a number of his prophecies did not pan out, and when he apologized that he had been wrong about some of them, and had mistakenly passed along false prophecies, he then received death threats and, in his words, “thousands of emails from Christians saying the nastiest and most vulgar things I have heard toward my family and ministry...” they accused me “of being a coward, a sellout, and a traitor to the Holy Spirit.”³

² John 10:15-16.

³ Ruth Graham, “Christian Prophets Are on the Rise. What Happens When They’re Wrong?”

How does Jesus describe those who enter His Gate and follow His leading as Shepherd? “*The Sheep follow him because they know His voice. They will not follow a stranger... because they do not know the voice of strangers.*” That is exactly what Jesus is doing in this text. He is comparing his leading to that of false prophecy: the seductive voices that have been swept up in the current winds of the time that claim they give voice to God’s will, when they are actually hurting, dividing and threatening the life of the sheep and destroying their community. Jesus, on the other hand, says His sheep know His voice – which we recognize, of course, as a unifying call to love, to care, to serve the vulnerable, and to build up human community rather than to tear it down.

Rabbi Harold Kushner is so wise when he writes about congregational life – how we are bonded to the purposes of God through prayer and praise and a continual renewing of our commitment to heal the world. He reminds us of what we have missed over the last year when we have not been able to worship in the same place. And he encourages what we have to look forward to in the coming months when we re-gather. Kushner writes: “I have come to believe that congregating is more important than words can speak. Something miraculous happens when people come together seeking the presence of God. The miracle is that we so often find it. Somehow the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts. A spirit is created in our midst which none of us brought into being. In our coming together, we create the atmosphere and the mood in which God is present.”

The Rabbi punctuates his observation with good humor saying, “We don’t go to church or synagogue at a stipulated time because God keeps office hours. We go because there will be other people there, seeking the same kind of encounter we are seeking... We go to gather together as in a sheepfold to find God in the exhilarating experience of transcending our isolation, our individuality, and becoming part of a greater whole. Knowing there is evil in the world, knowing that some of

the time the evil may even overpower us, we go to be reminded “to fear no evil.”⁴

Friends, in these uncertain times, when there are plenty of voices claiming to be prophetic, seeking to increase our division and divisiveness wherever we turn, remember – we know the voice of Jesus. Amid a threatening and violent world, remember Jesus leads us into the company of one another for nurture and rest. He also leads us out into the world, prodding us to serve in his name, because for the world he so loves he laid his own body down as the gate.

“I am the Gate... I am the Good Shepherd,” he bids us saying, “and you know My voice.”

AMEN.

⁴ Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God*, p. 149-50, 178.