

Sermon

I Am The Gate

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, April 30, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Eastertide

Psalm 23

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

John 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. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not

know the voice of strangers.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

John 10:7 So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

- I. Both our scripture passages today speak of sheep and shepherds.**
 - A. Psalm 23 is a statement of gratitude that because the Lord is my shepherd . . . I need not fear . . . because goodness and mercy will follow all the days of my life.**
 - B. Chapter 10 of John’s gospel is dedicated to various aspect of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and today we look at the first 10 verses — “I am the gate.”**
 - C. Seven times in the Gospel According to John we find Jesus saying, “I am” followed by a metaphor.**
 - 1. Light of the world (8:12; 9:5)**
 - 2. The Gate (10:7,9)**
 - 3. Bread of Life (6:35, 51)**
 - 4. Good Shepherd (10:11, 14)**
 - 5. The Resurrection & the Life (11:25)**
 - 6. The way, the truth, and the life (14:6)**
 - 7. The true vine (15:1, 6)**
 - D. Most of us will come to the metaphor of ourself as a sheep at a disadvantage because while sheep were**

common to Jesus and his listeners . . . not many of us today will have had extended contact with sheep.

E. Even when Jesus first spoke of this, John reports, *6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

F. So, perhaps it is wise to think for a minute about being sheep & and after that about having a shepherd.

II. The nature of Sheep

A. Sheep prefer living in community. In fact, they would rather follow than be pushed.

1. The unkind attribution of stupidity to sheep came not from shepherds, but from cowboys who were used to herding cattle — pushing them from behind — who found that sheep scatter when pushed from behind.

2. In communities where a shepherd lives with the sheep, they will naturally follow the one they have come to trust and know.

3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

B. My experience near Palmyra in Syria in 1993 — Shepherds with sheep.

- C. In contrast to that scene —**
The Sermon in Edinburgh in 2008 about taking sheep-dogs to abandoned Outer Hebridean islands to retrieve feral sheep after several decades of being on their own — analogy to the encounter pastors might have with their new parishioners.
- 1. A shepherd does not have the right to lead on the basis of title — that right must be earned by steadfast, persistent, loving-kindness.**
 - 2. You can *try* to push from behind, but don't be surprised when the sheep turn on you....**
- D. While sheep, by nature are communal and prone to follow — it is *also* true that they get lost.**
- 1. Sheep a bit like my old Beagle Barth - who put his nose to the ground, got busy following a scent and before he knew it was far away from home.**
 - 2. Sheep nibble, nibble, nibble - searching for the next green delight and wander from the herd and from the shepherd too.**
“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart, oh take and seal it — Seal it for Thy courts above!”
 - 3. Calvin's personal motto**
“My heart I give you, promptly and sincerely”
- E. Sarah and I love the sheep of Scotland**
- 1. Far more pleasant “over there on the hill”**

2. **Up close, wool full of detritus and not particularly pleasant smelling.**
3. **“Every one is ‘normal’ until you get up close to them.”**

III. Jesus is the faithful shepherd who sleeps at the gate and governs our “going out and coming in.” (Psalm 121:8)

*The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.*

Worth noting a few things about shepherds...

- A. **Not highly paid and often job for young or others perceived to be “weak.”**
 1. **The very young shepherds encountered on the path from Jerusalem to Jericho . . . small children scrambling over rock and cliff and using a sling to send small stones ricocheting near wayward sheep.**

† **An accuracy that would have impressed Olympic sharpshooters.**
- B. **Because shepherds live among sheep for long periods — naturally come to know them and care for them.**
 1. **Something closer to “friendship” than simply a farming relationship with the animal.**
- C. **As Jesus will outline as John chapter 10 continues . . . a “good shepherd” sacrifices for the sheep.**

1. Both Matthew and Luke record Jesus speaking of a good shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to find the one sheep who is lost.

⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

IV. In these weeks following Easter when we are meant to ask, “How will my discipleship be shaped by the reality of a risen Lord?”

A. — it is worth asking, “Am I willing to be a sheep?”

- 1. Am I humble enough to follow?**
- 2. Am I trusting enough to come when called?**
- 3. Am I committed to the remaining with the herd?**
- 4. Am I willing to let the shepherd regulate how often I eat and drink and sleep?**

B. Late in the gospel according to Matthew Jesus again speaks of sheep (and goats too!)

- 1. When the sheep ask, “When did we see you and feed you? Clothe you? visit you? Heal you?...”**

† When you did it to the least of these.
- 2. An important part of being “Sheep” in Jesus’ herd is to join in simple acts of kindness which help to make a workable human community.**

† **Matthew 25 initiate is one way CPC is trying to be a community of sheep who join in the important work God is doing with and among and for “the least of these.”**

- V. For 25 years I have been praying the daily offices**
 - A. On Monday I pray a prayer at Lauds — a prayer meant to consecrate the day. That is - to be intentional about how my day is going to be sacred.**
 - B. On Mondays the prayer of consecration addresses the metaphor of Jesus and the gate.**
 - 1. It also addresses sins which keep me from being a faithful sheep — in this case the sins of sloth/acedia, and greed which prevent me from joining God in the hard but noble work of establishing the kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven.”**
 - C. I want to close the sermon with that prayer of consecration.**
 - 1. I have stuffed your bulletins with a copy in case you want it to your own use.**

Lord God, you are the gate: standing at the threshold of our day and inviting us to cross-over and follow you. You are the door through which we

Find shelter and go out to pasture;

Cross from rest to labor;

From stillness to gathering our daily bread.

We confess our inclination to the sin of sloth. By it we misuse the gifts of shelter and rest as a way of living in the isolating cocoon of idleness in the service of selfish freedom. We misuse the gift of pasture as a means to uninhibited pursuit of personal

satisfaction because we fear that unless we excel in the competition for goods and influence, we will not get our share. Save us Lord from acedia and strengthen in us the virtue of fortitude.

In the presence of all the things which can make life hard —

teach us patience,

teach us resilience,

teach us perseverance in the pursuit of what is good and right.

Let us not grow weary in doing what is right. Teach us Lord to know when our trials and suffering can be avoided and when they are unavoidable and require fortitude.

On this day you created a dome to separate the water from the sky — a bubble where life might thrive even while surrounded by chaos. We praise you for the grace and genius of creation and offer ourselves as servants working with you to maintain the expanse you established as an enclave for life to flourish.

We pray not only for ourselves, but also for a world trapped in the extremes of despairing sloth on the one hand, and an over-eager participation in the rat-race of accumulation on the other.

Teach us all, Lord, that when both our place of rest and our place of productivity are found in you that there is a new kind of freedom and fruitfulness borne of the Spirit which begins to govern our life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.