

Sermon Easter 4A - Drive-in Worship
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
Rev. Ginger Litman-Koon
May 3, 2020

John 10:1-10

[Jesus said] “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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, 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.”

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The parish I served before moving to Mt. Pleasant was in the rural town of Chapin, SC. And one of the joys of my ministry was traveling out an old dirt road to visit with the wife of the late town mayor, Ms. Myrtis Shealy. Ms. Myrtis lived in a quaint cottage with a little rose garden out front and a fenced-in front yard she called her “pasture.” She loved nothing more in life than to set on her front porch and watch her “grandyoungins” run around and play out in the pasture. Her family was the light of her life, and we would scarcely have time to talk about anything else in our visits, as she loved to chronicle all the happenings among her flock of little lambs.

In her 92 years, she had seen her share of loss. She had not only buried her husband, but had nursed two of her children through debilitating illnesses until they too met an early end, many years ago. And I think that’s why she so reveled in any opportunity she had to keep watch over her grandchildren, because as long as they were corralled in her “pasture,” beneath her watchful eye, she knew they were safe and well.

Whenever the 23rd Psalm is assigned for the day, I always think of Ms. Myrtis, because it played a central role in her life of faith. Not only did she consider her family her own little flock, but it was clear that had a deep and abiding trust in the Shepherd. In times of loss or pain, Ms. Myrtis always turned to the 23rd Psalm as her mainstay of comfort and strength. Her children told me that when she was particularly overcome with emotion they could hear their mother go into her room, close the door,

take a deep breath, and begin reciting the 23rd Psalm aloud: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters...”

Today is “Good Shepherd Sunday,” when we too are invited to find our place in the bosom of the Good Shepherd, to trust in his leading and guiding, to be reminded that no matter what, our restless and wayward souls find their rest in him. Like Ms. Myrtis, we’re invited in times of stress, worry or grief, to remember that God has made us sheep of his own fold, lambs of his own flock, and that in his pasture we find safety.

And in our gospel reading from the 10th Chapter of John, we hear more of the sheep imagery. As I was first reading the assigned passage for today, my ears perked up and I was sure Jesus was going to deliver that most memorable of lines when Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life.

Jesus says to his disciples, “Very truly, I tell you,” and he says “I AM the Gate for the sheep.” The what? That’s not the line, Jesus! Jesus goes on, “All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.” Jesus continues. “I AM...” Oh, here we go. Lay it on us, Jesus! “I AM the Gate,” he says again. No! “Good Shepherd!” Jesus, you’re supposed to say “I AM the Good Shepherd.” It’s Good Shepherd Sunday, for pete’s sake! What’s this business about a Gate? Well this is one of the less memorable of Jesus’ I AM statements in the Gospel of John. We remember him saying, “I am the bread of life. “I am the light of the world. “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” But I AM the Gate? A bit odd, don’t you think?

Maybe...but remember Ms. Myrtis’ “pasture”? The place just outside her front door, where she could watch the little’uns running around without fear? Well, the only reason she can trust that they would be safe is the gate. Everyone knows kids are like gas - they expand to fill any container they’re in. You open the lid, and some of them gonna try to escape! But with the gate securely fastened, even the most rambunctious of little lambs can frolick in safety.

When you look at them, all of the I AM Statements of Jesus - bread, light, life, shepherd - are about the abundance, provision, protection we find in Jesus. And the same is true for this, albeit strange, image of the gate. Behind the gate, even the most prone to wander amongst God’s little lambs - that’s you and me - can rest secure in the sheepfold, can enjoy all the blessings and provisions things we hear about in Psalm 23: Green pastures, still waters, Restoration of the soul, comfort, mercy.

I think these days, the idea of staying safe behind the gate, or door, can feel very relatable. Behind closed doors, we feel safe in our own homes (I hope), protected from the threat that lurks beyond our walls. As long as we stay on this side of the door of the house, or of the car, or the fence gate, we’ll be OK. I think we could very easily translate this passage to current vernacular: “Very truly I tell you, I am like your front door during a pandemic. Whoever enters by me will be safe, and will come in and go out and find toilet paper!”

Well, maybe that’s not exactly what Jesus is promising, but what Jesus is promising his flock is more than just protection from dangers that lurk beyond the Gate. He says with him, what we find is not only the absence of harm, but so much more than that - full, abundant life. “I came that they may

have life,” Jesus says, “and have it abundantly.” So what does that really mean? I think this experience of quarantine is letting us all wrestle with that question for ourselves.

Does abundant life mean busy days filled with lots of extracurricular activities? does it mean the luxury to go out and shop and spend? does it mean full social calendars? Or are we finding that it can mean something much simpler than that? That abundant life can have less to do with how much we do, how much we have or how much we accomplish, and more to do with finding time to be grateful for what God has first given us? I suspect many of us are finding time these days to be grateful and appreciate what we do have - our lives, our health, the food on our table, our most cherished relationships.

And we find that’s what Jesus’ Sheep and Gate imagery today is all about. It’s about relationship. Being “in the fold” does not mean entering into some exclusive group it means entering into relationship with Christ. It means being in covenant relationship with the one whose mission to save us will take him beyond guarding us from the threat of evil, but all the way to laying down his life in order to free us from its power over us once and for all. Entering into the sheepfold by the Gate means being called by name in the waters of Baptism by none other than the Good Shepherd, who, in loving paradox, becomes himself the sacrificial lamb in order to give life to his flock and give it abundantly.

A few days before Ms. Myrtis died I remember praying Psalm 23 with her at her bedside. She knew that her time was coming. She had grown very weak, and was beginning to say her goodbyes. When we spoke the words of the Psalm together, even though she didn’t have the strength to get out all the words, I could see the calm that came over her, like a wave of peace and contentment. It’s because she knew that as a sheep of Christ’s fold, the place secured for her by the Shepherd could not be defined by walls, doors, or even a well-secured front gate. She knew that being in the fold meant an abiding relationship with her Savior that knew no boundaries.

She knew that the safety she rested so securely in had very little to do with whether she lived or died, but it had everything to do with the promise made to her in Baptism, by the one who laid down his life for her. She knew that even in her final hours, no evil would befall, no thief or bandit threaten her, because Christ, the Gate, placed his life between them and hers. Through him, she had come in and through him she would go out and awake to find greener pastures.

May we, too have such a trust in the Shepherd, that even in the face of that which would threaten to destroy, even in the valley of the shadow of death, even in the presence of our enemies, we shall fear no evil. May we be so bold as to declare, just as Ms. Myrtis did so many times “I shall not want.” In spite of everything surrounding us, may we too be so bold as to proclaim, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”