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Weekend of Sunday, April 12, 2020
4th Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Acts 2:42-47
Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:19-25
Gospel Reading: John 10:1-10
Sermon Title: “I am the Gate for the Sheep”

Theme

Jesus uses an image familiar to the people of his day to make a point about spiritual leadership. Those who listen to Jesus are led to abundant life.

Text

[Jesus said:] 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.”

Sermon

As promised last weekend, the lectionary returns us to the Gospel of John and departs from the Post-Resurrection timeline. Now through May, we will go hoppy-skippy throughout John's gospel in no particular pattern that is obvious to me, with Gospel Readings from Jesus' pre-Passion life and ministry.

For example, this week's Gospel Reading follows the story of the healing of the man born blind that we had as the Gospel Reading, back on March 22nd, the 4th Sunday of Lent!

If you recall that story, Jesus healed a man born blind and the Pharisees had a big hissy-fit over it because Jesus made the mud that he used to heal the man on the Sabbath!

I think it is important for you to hear how that story ends, to understand the context of today's Gospel Reading.

John 9:39 Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." 40Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

So Jesus just called the Pharisees blind to their own sin, and more specifically, he told them they had *spiritual blindness*. He said this because they, like all the Jews, were too locked into the *keeping* of the Law of Moses and had over-looked the opportunity to give God true spiritual worship for what God had just done through Jesus in the spirit of the Law, and that was, of course, the healing of the man born blind. They, the Pharisees specifically, and the Jews generally, could not see him for who he is, and they could not see the activity of God in their midst.

You need to know that, the attitudes of Jesus and the Pharisees, as we now transition to today's Gospel Reading.

If you have a red-letter edition of the Bible in front of you, then you will notice that almost all of this passage is red, meaning that Jesus was the only one doing the talking. The Pharisees were being taken to school and this will continue to the

conversation's end at verse 21 when they are left with a decision to make about Jesus: Either he is who he said he is, or he is demon-possessed because he has supernatural power. More on that decision at the end of the sermon.

So, it is within that same conversation Jesus was having with the Pharisees, that he described himself when he said, "I am the gate for the sheep." What does that mean? I'm so glad you asked, and I will answer that question shortly.

Before he said that, he described First Century shepherding for us and that too will require us to review a moment.

Sheep, though incredibly stupid and nervous beasts, were an indispensable part of the First Century economy in the Middle-East.

Sheep were raised for their wool that could be woven into warm clothing. Spinning and weaving wool was something that almost every First-Century middle-eastern peasant woman knew how to do. Spinning yarn and weaving material for making clothes for her family and some to sell to others was one of her contributions to her family.

Sheep were raised for their meat which was a staple of middle-eastern diets. I didn't know this until I researched it but some sheep were used for milk production.

After the sheep were slaughtered, the skins were used for writing material and other leather uses, and their hides were used for clothing and other purposes.

And lanolin, an oil secreted from the sheep's skin, has been used by humans beings as a topical skin cream for hundreds of years.

Sheep were also bred to sell. Ewes, the female sheep, reach maturity in six to eight months, and after that can produce from one to several lambs at least once a year.

Shepherding sheep was the lowest of First-Century middle-eastern occupations, usually reserved for the youngest of the boys in the family or even a hired-hand or a slave. A shepherd might take his sheep out on the pastured hills of the Middle-East for weeks at a time. During the day the stupid sheep would keep their heads down and continue to mow forward. The shepherd's job was to continually call the sheep to remind them to stay within the flock where he would make sure they were safe.

And speaking of safety, there were natural predators in Middle-East like wolves and bears, yes, bears. And because of their value in the economy, there were human predators as well. (Illustration) So, at the end of the day, the shepherd would find or make a sheep pen called a sheepfold. The sheepfold wouldn't necessarily keep the predators out, but it would confine the sheep, more or less, as it only had one gate, one way in and out. A good shepherd would then position himself in that opening as the gate for the sheep to keep predators out and the sheep in. (Illustration over)

So, all that was not meant to impress you with my useless knowledge of sheep and shepherding in the First-Century Middle-East, but to inform us of the importance of sheep in the First-Century Middle-eastern economy, and it also informs us as to why Jesus would humble himself and use an inanimate object like a gate for the sheep as an illustration for himself.

Well, it gets more humbling than that. The reason Jesus used this whole sheep/shepherding/sheep-gate motif is because of who we, human beings, are in the metaphor. Yes, you probably guessed it, we are the sheep.

Jesus, who referred to himself as the good shepherd in verse 11, does what is required to keep his sheep, his followers, safe all day and all night. Like the good shepherd who constantly calls to his sheep so they don't venture off into harm's way, Jesus calls his followers, throughout our lives, keeping us safe from wandering off too far to the left or right. And if we aren't too stubborn, he *will* lead us safely to our day's end.

But along our spiritual journey, we will experience other influences that will attempt to get us out and away from the safety of the fellowship of the church. For us today it might be COVID-19, this disease that prevents us from *gathering* as a church, but it cannot prevent us from *being* the church, if we don't let it. That little voice in the back of your head that tells you that you've watched enough television, and it's time to dust off your Bible and read it, is the voice of our Good Shepherd, Jesus.

But in this passage, he specifically calls himself *the gate for the sheep*, and by that he means that he is the first and last line of defense for us, his sheep. There will be others, perhaps other influences that will attempt to harm us, but we who try to

remain his faithful followers have to trust that he, Jesus Christ our Lord, has placed himself in the only access to us. That doesn't mean evil will not attempt to find other ways to get to us. Notice, in this metaphor, Jesus acknowledged that will happen. But I believe that he hopes that by that time, we know enough to recognize those voices as the voices of thieves and bandits who intend to do us harm.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Now back to the context I so tediously laid out for you at the beginning. Remembering that Jesus was talking to the Pharisees who were all out of sorts because he gave sight to a man born blind on a Sabbath day, Jesus is warning us that there will be those who will try to steal us away with ungodly logic and reasoning.

But we are not helpless wandering sheep that are prime for picking off. We may have our sheep-like moments, (let me hear an *amen* church?) but if we know Jesus, through our devotional life and study of Bible and regular attendance at worship – even television or computer monitor church, then we know his voice and we will follow where he leads us. And where he leads us is always safe and good for us.

This dialogue with the Pharisees in which Jesus refers to himself with various shepherding illustrations goes on for another eight verses, and at the end of those verses, the Pharisees are left with a decision to make. John wrote:

the Jews were divided because of these words. ²⁰Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?" ²¹Others were saying, "These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

This reminds me of a famous quote by CS Lewis from his book, *Mere Christianity* that I would like to read to you:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be

a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell.

You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a time for all of us to increase our efforts to stay the course, and remain faithful to Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd who lays his life down to protect ours. We are not blind to the truth as the Pharisees were in the previous story of the healing of the man born blind. Now that we can see, we know better, and now that we know better, we need to do better.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, many of us feel as though we are in the valley of death at this present time. But while we are in the valley, give us your Holy Spirit that we might grow in faith in you. Call us and guide us through to the other side. Amen