

## John 10: 1-10

10 '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. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

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

### John 10: 1-10 The Shepherd and the Gate... and the Flock

Christ is risen; He is risen indeed. We are still marking our Sundays counting from the Day of Easter. On this fourth Sunday of Easter, we began our worship with a proclamation "We are a Resurrection people, called by God to live a Resurrection life." What does that mean? One way of understanding it is that we live our lives as a witness to what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Last week, I began by acknowledging how the flow of our individual lives don't always go with the set narrative of the church's liturgical seasons. But there is something to be said about, some wisdom to be gained by yielding our individual lives to the larger story of the community; to zoom out from the point of view of an individual sheep that each of us are, to that of the entire flock.

In our collective life as the church, we are only halfway through the Eastertide, moving towards Jesus's ascension, his return to God and to his heavenly home, from which he will send the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The Day of Pentecost brings the Easter season to a close, but it is also a new beginning, because it is when the Holy Spirit empowered followers of Christ gathered in one place, to share the Good News with the world, giving birth to the church, the body of risen Christ in the world.

So, on our journey through the church year, we are in this liminal space with the disciples, as wait for the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost. A liminal space is a space betwixt and between; a place of "already" and "not yet." Christ is already risen, but as we heard in the stories of Jesus's resurrection appearances, the risen Christ is not immediately recognizable. Our

next step into the life of faith in the risen Christ is yet unclear. How will we recognize Christ whom we are to follow, whose body we are as a church to continue his work in this world?

In this liminal space, we wait with the disciples, remembering what Jesus taught about himself while he was in our midst, so that we can discern and step into the right path to follow. So, we are back this morning in John's Gospel where Jesus was speaking, using a figure of speech, a metaphor, almost like a parable, to talk about himself as the gate to the sheepfold. Jesus is the gate we are to go through if we are to follow the right path.

But curiously, he starts by talking about a thief and a bandit who climbs into the sheepfold and not through the gate, only to steal, to kill and destroy. Then, in contrast to the thief, he presents the shepherd as the one who comes through the gate, to protect and save the sheep from danger.

The only proper access to the sheep in the sheepfold is through the gate. The gate is the mutual access-point for the Shepherd and the sheep to one another. The gate is where the sheep can safely come and go, to be led out by the Shepherd to green pastures and to still waters, and to be brought back, again by the Shepherd, to the safety of the sheepfold for rest and protection.

The sheep run away from the thieves and bandits who break into the sheepfold because they are strangers, and the sheep don't recognize their voices. In contrast, as the Shepherd enters through the gate calling each sheep by its name; he has relationship with each one. The sheep hear his voice and know the shepherd and follow him because they trust him. Thieves kill and destroy; the Shepherd protects, saves, and provides for life. Whom do you follow? The choice is clear, in the story, at least.

"But they did not understand what he was saying to them." Who were "they"? Who was Jesus speaking to? This passage is actually continuation from the story of Jesus healing a man who was born blind. But the religious leaders rejected the man's testimony that Jesus must be the one sent from God and ended up "driving him out." It is to those religious leaders, some of the Pharisees, Jesus told the story about fake leaders who are actually thieves and bandits out to destroy the flock, and the true Shepherd who protects, heals, and restores the flock.

Jesus's criticism of these particular Jewish leaders who opposed him is not his rejection of the Jewish religion. Jesus was a Jewish leader, too. In fact, in telling this story using the image of the shepherd, Jesus was drawing on the common metaphor of God as the Good

Shepherd found in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Hebrew Scripture, the Shepherd metaphor is used not only for God but also for kings and other leaders.

Although Jesus will later talk about himself also as the Good Shepherd, in today's passage, the Shepherd is God. And Psalm 23, which Barbara read for us this morning, is the most beautiful expression of God as the Good Shepherd, who protects, saves, and gives life.

We may hear the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm read most often at funerals, and understandably so because it brings such comfort to those who are grieving the loss of their loved ones. Yet, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm 23 is a song of confidence, with motifs of a trusting relationship. It is a song for the living; especially for those who are living with stress, those who daily confront many stressors. It is for the living of our stressful days, and it is in response to this stress, the psalmist reminds us who the Lord is, what the Lord does and who we actually are. The words of comfort the psalm provides do not come in vacuum, but find us in our darkest moment.

How do we know the Psalmist is facing stress? The unspoken condition from which the psalmist utters each line tells us of his stress. The Psalmist who says because the Lord is his Shepherd, he shall not want, knows what it is to be in need, of food, shelter, safety.

The Psalmist claims God restores his soul because his soul is wounded and broken. The Psalmist trusts that the Lord leads him in right paths because he knows himself to be lost. His experience of deep distress and despair that could turn deadly makes him say he would not be afraid, for God is with him. He praises God for preparing the table before him in the presence of his enemy, for he is surrounded by his enemy. The psalmist is experiencing stress from multiple sources, just as we are today.

The Psalm was written about 3000 years ago. The way of life on this earth has changed, a lot; there has been great advancement in most areas of human life in terms of knowledge and technology. And yet, we love this psalm and resonate with the psalmist, because we recognize the human condition out of which he sings. It is our condition, too.

We live in the world still plagued by prevalence of lack: too many people still suffer the lack of shelter, food, healthcare, education, and the safety from all kinds of human-caused violence, prejudice, discrimination and oppression. What does it mean to sing Psalm 23 today, the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want? What does it look like to follow the Good Shepherd in this world today? Or how can we be leaders that go through the gate to access the flock in the sheepfold, rather than a thief and a bandit.

Jesus shows us: the choice is clear. Choose what is life-giving and restorative for the whole flock. The false leaders, the thieves and the bandits, are out to steal, kill and destroy the flock. The Good Shepherd knows each sheep by name, treat each life as precious, and yet leads ALL of them out of the sheepfold, through the gate, to lead all of them to abundant life. Christ the Gate open to all so all may follow the Shepherd to green pastures and still waters. Christ the Gate welcomes all who follow the Shepherd to the safety, protection, and rest in the sheepfold.

When we look at ourselves as the Resurrection People called to live the Resurrection Life, are we being the gate that Jesus says he is, that allow access to all to the source of abundant life?

When we look at our leaders, in our private or public spheres, in our community and in the larger world, who are there leading, protecting, saving and restoring, and who do you see killing and destroying? Whose voice do you recognize as your Shepherd's? Pray that we recognize his voice, so we follow the voice through the gate that leads to life.

The multiple stressors each of us are carrying may be uniquely our own. It may be overwhelming, and too often so. Remember you are not alone but in the sheepfold with others. We may be in the liminal space of not knowing exactly how to proceed through the gate that is Christ who gives the abundant life. But the Psalmist shows us we can sing the song of confidence in God, even and especially in the midst of confusion and even despair. God will guide us and deliver us; for Christ has come and he is risen already. Let us listen for the voice of the Shepherd who will lead us, through the gate, into the life abundant for all of his flock.