

St. John's Tappahannock
Sermon 4.26.26
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
John 10:1-10

10:1-10 '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. 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.

Ask folks what images stand out in the passage?

Most people love the Good Shepherd image.

The term 'good', of Good Shepherd, in Greek is 'makos', which extends the idea of goodness to mean 'real and proper and true'. We love the Good Shepherd image because it speaks to Jesus' goodness.

In our BCP, (p. 459) is a lovely prayer for children. We are all children of God, and can find the comfort in this prayer which is slightly adapted.

'Lord Jesus Christ, Good Shepherd of the sheep, you gather the lambs in your arms and carry them to your bosom: We commend [ourselves] to your loving care. Guard us from all danger, bestow on us your gifts of gladness and strength, and raise us up to a life of service to you. Hear us, we pray, for all of our sake.' Amen.

So honestly, I think we all know, this calm peaceful Shepherd can be our Tower of Strength, in any given situation.

But how do most folks like being compared the sheep imagery?

However, when I was in high school, and I started the age appropriate tendency to question things, (and let's remember the Doubting Thomas story, and how that is not a problem!). Anyway, at that time, a time when we are trying to figure out who we are and who we want to be, the image of the people of God as a flock of sheep seemed weak. Sheep are vulnerable because they blindly follow; without a shepherd will get lost; they cannot defend themselves against wolves, and they cannot carry heavy burdens...as an animal totem the sheep image is not very empowering. However, sheep do provide meat, milk and wool, and were considered very valuable in the Bible times, and now. Jesus often used familiar images in his parables and teachings that people could relate to. It remains a stretch for us modern folks who need to be assertive, confident, and extroverted in order to succeed in most organizations and relationships.

Let's look at some scriptures that might renew our understanding of these shepherds and sheep.

In the first two examples, Jesus fulfills OT promises that God himself will come to shepherd his people

Ezek 34:11; 30-31 ³⁰They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord GOD. ³¹You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture,^[a] and I am your God, says the Lord GOD.

In Isaiah 40 is a nurturing image:

Isaiah 40:11 - He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

In this next verse the psalmist is expressing how God is always with us.

Psalm 121:8

The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

This means that as we go out from our home and into the world and back again, or we go to our place of worship and out into the world and back again, we know that it is God's desire to walk with us, to keep us safe.

A Jewish tradition which some Christians share is to place a mezuzah on the door of their homes to remind them of this Psalm. It is a artful cylindric container which contains a tiny scroll with Psalm 121:8 inside.

And this next scripture from Isaiah should make us take pause.

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—everyone—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6)

On this Fourth Sunday in Easter, this can be a reminder we are to continue to reflect on how precious Jesus' death on the cross is for our salvation.

The Gates

In the passages before today's reading in John, Jesus says, "I 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.

Jesus provides the good shepherding needed for the abundant life.

And what is the abundant life? As we'll see in the weeks ahead, the abundance Jesus has in mind isn't a life of material wealth, but rather of love and intimacy with God and creation, like the trusting companionship of sheep and shepherd.

What does the mean, or can it mean?

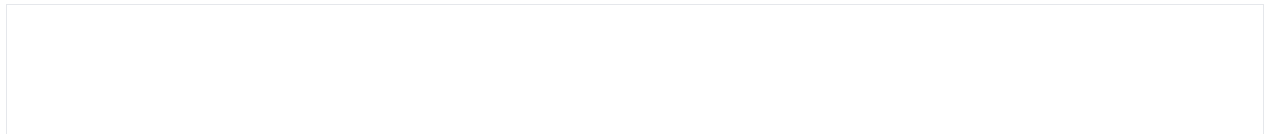
It can mean of the beloved community that 'we are in this together', or that about certain things we are of one accord or of one mind. For example, as Jesus' followers, we should each want the other to have life, and have it abundantly, and

this kind of unity, intimacy and good will, in fact this kind of communion, is how Jesus would have us be in the world.

This is the good news of the gospel. God is with us, God and calls us by Name. The Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want. (Ps 23)

This is what abundant life is like. Having a good shepherd to guide us throughout all of our lives, to whom we can trust in every detail of our lives.

Now let us consider the gate imagery.



In 2004 I was working at St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church in Atlanta, and I read about an art exhibit in NYC called *The Gates*, by Christo and Jeanne Claude, a husband and wife team whose art form was a type of environmental art, whereby fabric was draped on landscapes throughout the world. They called it fabric wrapping. I was unable to see *The Gates* in person, but it I feel it is an been an iconic symbol of the spiritual journey. I will explain that in a moment, but first let me give you an idea of their other work:

- *Surrounded Islands* – the shores of 11 small islands in Biscayne Bay, FL were covered in pink fabric – from a plane they looked like pink edged paramecium.
- *Running Fence*, comprised of a 25 mile tall fence of white fabric, had the same effect on the landscape as viewing a portion of the great wall of China
- *Valley Curtain* hung between Grand Junction and Glenwood Springs in the Shenandoah Valley. The valley draped in fabric looked like a curtain for a larger than life outdoor theatre.
- *Back to The Gates...*

The official title is *The Gates: Central Park NY, 1979-2005* because apparently it took almost 25 years to have all the meetings, consultations, approved proposals, etc., to be completed. Probably without eccentric and art savvy Michael Bloomberg as Mayor at the time, it never would have come together.

They finally got permission to plant 15,000 steel gates draped in bright orange fabric, along the sidewalk in Central Park in 2004. Walking through the gates, everyone makes their own impressions.

Not surprisingly, my associations with the term 'gate' harked back to the images from John 10. Throughout our lives, we go through many thresholds, or growth points, i.e., gates. Obvious ones are going from high school to college, getting married, our first real job, losses like death of a loved one, but also, others like simply moving up to a new level in your workout routine, or musical level, or seeking new ways to serve God, or whatever your interest is...all of it involves levels of improvement and growth.

These are usually not easy transitions, and so I picture Jesus the Good Shepherd meeting us at the gates along the way, to nudge us forward. To let go of what we need to let go of, and take on what we need to take on. Thomas Merton spoke of the false self and the true self, and I believe in the Christian journey, over a lifetime, we are always moving from one to the other on a continuum. Sometimes the growth is subtle, sometimes it is a breakthrough. But always, Jesus accompanies us.

Thomas Merton wrote, "True encounter with Christ liberates something in us, a power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life, a resilience, an ability to bounce back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change, a power of creative transformation." And I would add, imagination. Because we are each becoming our own unique selves, and are a vital part of God's diverse creation. Even if we have managed to evolve into all we can be, without Jesus by our side, we cannot be fully human. That is why being a sheep of the fold in the end *is* empowering – Jesus loves each of us and yet knows we can be easily lost in a world of illusions, and is happy to prod us in the most lifegiving direction.

So the Good Shepherd reaches out beyond our modern notions of our total self-sufficiency, competence and personal power, and reminds us that it is He who carries us when things are beyond our human control. And He welcomes being there for us. And wants us to trust in Him in all things. To not be deceived by the false gods of our times, but to rely on Him in humility and total trust. And to share our faith with others who so desperately need hope in a world full of unfairness and betrayal.

In any case, those in the fold can celebrate that in Him we are made whole. As Paul proclaims in Eph. 3:14-22

Eph. 3:14-22 ¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,^[c] ¹⁵ from whom every family^[d] in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

