

Sermon
The Fourth Sunday of Easter: Good Shepherd Sunday
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: Acts 2:42-47; Ps 23; 1 Pet 2:19-25; Jn 10:1-10

Many of you know that I've just come back from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We saw sheep and shepherds several times while we were there: by the side of the highway, on rough and rugged hillsides. Seeking pasture was clearly not a matter of finding a beautiful fenced in field of green. And it was clear that they weren't going back to any kind of barn or outbuilding at night. They were truly on the move, shepherd and sheep, together. The sheep needed the shepherd to lead them, to guide and protect them.

Many a sermon has wrestled with the image of sheep and shepherd that we are offered in Scripture, particularly on this Fourth Sunday of Easter – often referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday”. And much has been said about sheep being “dumb”, but Barbara Brown Taylor invited me out of that perspective and I invite you out of it, too! She describes a conversation with a friend who grew up on a sheep farm. This friend told her that cows are

herded from the rear, with shouts and the crack of whips. That doesn't work with sheep, though. Stand behind sheep and make loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you. Sheep prefer to be led. They won't go anywhere that someone else – their shepherd – does not go first to show them that everything is alright. Makes sense to me! And this is what I saw in the Holy Land: the shepherd was leading the sheep, keeping them off the highway, leading them to the next patch of vegetation.

As I said, we didn't see farms with barns or outbuildings for sheep. We saw rough, rugged, rocky hillsides. There were caves and hollows, and large groupings of stones. This is where sheep and shepherd rested at night.

It's important to keep this in mind as we enter into the story that our Gospel passage offers us this morning. It also makes sense of Jesus's words: I am the gate. We don't actually hear Jesus say "I am the good shepherd" this morning: that happens in verse 11 and we stopped at verse 10!

What we do hear Jesus say is "I am the gate". "Gate" is probably more accurately translated as "door", but gate seems to have been chosen to fit with the images of sheep and shepherds. Door, or gate, either one, in our Western imaginations, is probably solid. Rigid. Easily closed.

That's not what Jesus is talking about here. You might know that at nighttime, shepherds, in ancient Israel, would have led their sheep to a sheepfold that was an enclosure of loosely stacked stones. The shepherd would lie down at the opening – acting as a gate – meaning that a predator would have to climb over him to get to the sheep. In the morning, sheep and shepherd would be on the move again, the sheep knowing the shepherd's voice, and the shepherd leading and guiding.

Our Christian tradition has often had a narrow and rigid view of the words "...whoever enters by me will be saved", interpreting them in a "ticket into heaven" way, making them exclusive. Who's in, who's out. The whole verse, though: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find

pasture.” And the next verse: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Jesus says in the story that the sheep know his voice. In the same way that this story has been misinterpreted and misused to exclude certain people from “the fold”, the idea of knowing Jesus’s voice has been misused. Voices that speak hatred, exclusion, harsh judgement: these are not Jesus’s voice. Jesus’s voice speaks love. His voice speaks connection.

There isn’t a formula for hearing Jesus’s voice: if this, then that. There are patterns and ways help us though: we hear Jesus’s voice in Scripture. We hear it in the voice speaking from our own souls. And, we hear it in the voice of the faithful community. That’s why places like this beloved community of Ascension are part of the way of Jesus. That’s what our reading from Acts this morning points us to: life in community. Life that is interconnected, intertwined. Life that creates opportunities for us to help one another to hear God’s voice.

Today's Gospel passage isn't a story about how to get a ticket into heaven. This isn't a story about gatekeeping, monitoring who is in or out of the flock or fold. It isn't a competition with only a blessed few hearing Jesus's voice because they've prayed enough, listened enough, been good enough. It's about life: abundant life. It's about a way of living. It's about a way of living that is like sheep and shepherd: coming and going from a place of protection, deeply relational, connected and moving – often over rocky terrain!

I was reminded of the poem "I Stand By the Door" this week. It was written by the Reverend Sam Shoemaker, an Episcopal priest in the United States who introduced the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous to the spiritual principles that led to the 12 steps. This is the first stanza:

I stand by the door.
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out,
The door is the most important door in the world—
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.
There's no use my going way inside, and staying there,
When so many are still outside, and they, as much as I,
Crave to know where the door is.
And all that so many ever find
Is only the wall where a door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like those who are blind.

With outstretched, groping hands,
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,
Yet they never find it . . .
So I stand by the door.

I'll share the whole poem with you in the newsletter this week. This speaks to our calling as followers of Jesus. We are all called to stand by the door so that we might be signs – hands to hold, light in the darkness – for others searching for the door to the abundant life that Jesus is talking about in our Gospel passage today. Abundant life that is found in relationship with God, through the way – the gate, the door – that is Jesus. Abundant life that is found in living the way that sheep and shepherds lived in ancient Israel and still live in many places in the Middle East today: a way that is about coming and going from a place of protection, deeply relational, connected and moving. This way – this deeply relational and connected way – is what helps us to find the door. It's what helps us to make our way over the rocky terrain that is part of this life's journey.

May you hear the voice of Jesus whispering a message of love in your soul this morning. May you feel deep connections in this place, and may this help you over whatever terrain you travel this week. As you move through this week, look for ways to stand by the door that is Jesus and hold out your hand to someone, be a light to someone, in his name. Amen.