

Listening to the Shepherd's Voice

John 10:1-10

Sunday, May 5, 2020

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We listen for the voice of our Good Shepherd, the one who promises abundance and safety.

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In case you've lost track or are suffering from a moderate case of "quarantine brain," today is Sunday. It is the first Sunday of May, 2020. It is the fourth Sunday of Easter, a Sunday the church calls "Good Shepherd Sunday." The designation is not so much a fondness of sheep, but rather an acknowledgment that Christ our Good shepherd is the Risen Lord who is in the world, calling, gathering, and protecting his own.

Good Shepherd Sunday reminds us that Easter is more than a solitary day. Easter is seven weeks of discovering the power and possibility of the resurrection. In these great 50 days we celebrate the promise that God calls us all to crawl out of the tombs of despair.

The only difference is that when we crawl out of those tombs this year, our hair is going to be six inches longer!

We are scratching at the doors of our confinements. The scenes of crowded beaches and boisterous protests in state capitol buildings are reminders of our discomfort. We are tired of social distancing, of masks and constantly washing hands. We say to each other, "I can't wait until this mess is over." That is especially true in the cases of those wonderful families who agreed that their son or daughter could bring home the classroom pet at spring break!

But our enthusiasm for breaking out is curbed by another more ominous concerns that moving out and about too soon will only increase the spread of Covid-19.

So there's the predicament: the grass is green, days are warmer, the azaleas blooming. It's Sunday, the first Sunday of May, the fourth Sunday of Easter—only this year, we are wondering what resurrection really means, or if it even matters.

This year, we are aware that at least 60,000 some Americans have died since March. This year, we are aware that millions of persons have lost their jobs, and that all of us have had our lives interrupted in ways both large and small. Yes, the grass is green, the days are warmer, the azaleas are blooming...but does any of this matter in a time when we yearn for assurances of safety, and promises of abundance?

I believe that the is the question which is very much at the heart of decisions regarding "reopening." We long for the doors to be opened, for communities to be together. We do long for resurrection and all it offers. I also believe this was the very question turning in the hearts of the disciples when Jesus said, "I am the gate of the sheep."

Notice that within John's gospel, there are seven times when Jesus makes definitive statements about his identity. These "I Am statements" offer assurances and promises. They identify Jesus as the bread of life, as the light of the world, as the resurrection and the life, the gate for the sheep, the good shepherd who lays down his life, the way, the truth and the life, and the true vine. Two of these "I am statements" are here in chapter 10: the gate of the sheep, and the good shepherd.

These statements reveal Jesus by disclosing what it means to trust in him. They are concrete images: light, bread, resurrection, vines.

And...gates.

Within scripture, doors and gates have symbolic meaning. In the Old Testament, doors were symbols of deliverance. In the Passover story, doors were marked with blood so that God would preserve the enslaved Hebrew people. God's people sang praises as they passed through the doors of the temple, for these were the gates of righteousness.

Whenever our family would visit my father's relatives in Virginia, I always felt like I was time traveling through a doorway to the past. One of his elderly aunts lived on a portion of the family farmstead. Getting to her front door was a bit of an adventure that required meandering off the main road to a gravel road, to a dirt driveway...and always through a series of gates. At each gate, dad would stop the car, open the gate, get back in, drive through, and close the gate. The function of the gate was clear: it provided access to those who belonged, and kept others away.

There are times when we hear Jesus' words, "I am the gate for the sheep" and are tempted to think in similar ways. It sounds as though he is the gatekeeper, the one who allows in those who belong and rejects those who do not. If that is so, then it might be fair to ask who is Jesus letting in, and what is he offering?

Who does Jesus let through the gate?

Well, the gospel of John offers some clues. There is the blindman who regains his sight in chapter 9, a man who had been cast aside and ignored. Many scholars believe these references in chapter 10 are in fact a commentary on that story. The blindman in chapter 9. Jesus lets him through the gate. And then in chapter eight of John's Gospel there's a woman who's been caught committing adultery. The authorities bring her to Jesus, but he never picks up a stone. She gets in, too. Then there's the crowds who followed him. They were hungry and no one had thought to buy food for them to eat. Yet Jesus let them in...and the disciples fed them and the leftovers filled 12 baskets. There's the woman at the well, and even Nicodemus with all of his questions...the implication is that each of them is welcomed by Jesus. In fact, Jesus has said "all whom the Father has given me will come to me, and I will never drive them away."

Jesus is the gate for those who are lost, scared, hurting and marginalized. He is the way into the fold of God's love, where we receive the assurance of abundant life.

That is our good news. And it is that good news which reminds us that the gates of Christ are always opened—even in a time when so much is shut down. These marvelous Mother's Day Gifts are evidence of how those swinging gates remain open. These gifts of hope are reminders of God's love opened to the world. They are signs of the abundant life Jesus promises. These gifts, which include the amazing bags donated by Debbie Strathearn, facemasks made by Kay Baker, so many items donated by other members of the church, are signs of the promise of resurrection...our assurance of safety, and promise of abundance.

On Friday I learned about the passing of one of the most gentle and scholarly persons I have ever known. Dr. Patrick Miller had been a professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was renowned for his wealth of knowledge, but also his depth of kindness. He was a scholar whose scholarship shaped his ministry and a pastor whose compassion influenced his scholarship. Years ago, Dr. Miller preached a sermon at a colleague's funeral. Referring to Psalm 139, Dr. Miller said:

In these words, the psalmist gives voice to the Christian confidence that the one who has said from the beginning: "I am with you always," says also to us at the end: "You are always with me." What matters in all this—and I believe it to be true with all my heart—is the Christian conviction, confirmed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we are forever kept in the mercy and love of God. That was true before we were born; that will be true after we have died and our bodies have disappeared. Who and what we are still lives with God and is kept by God. And God will complete the work begun in us. Elsewhere the Psalmist puts it—and I know this word primarily because my mother repeated it every day during the twenty years she lived after my father's death: "Precious in the sight of the Lord, is the death of his saints."¹

While there is no doubt that the world has changed a lot since March, there is also something which has not changed. Jesus remains the gate to the sheep. That gate has never been closed, and it always leads to abundant life.

Amen.

¹ Patrick D. Miller, "We Are the Lord's," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* (Vol. XXIV, No. 2, New Series 2003, p. 190.)