

I AM THE GATE



Easter 4/A 3 May 2020

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Even though the calendar may tell us that we are three weeks into the Church's joyous Easter season, our lives these days may feel more like one long penitential Lenten discipline of denial with all the social distancing, forced isolation, day-long grocery trips, home schooling, and the daily accounting of mounting COVID-related infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. Even as we proclaim the truth of the Easter resurrection – *Alleluia! Christ is risen!* – our voices are muffled and distorted by mandatory face masks. Good Friday seems to cast a very long shadow this year. Prohibited from gathering together and celebrating the Great Feast of Easter as we have always done before, we may feel that the somber tone of Lent is lingering far longer than its allotted forty days.

But for this morning I invite you to come with me as, at least for a short while, we try to break free from this darker Lenten outlook.

You may have noticed that I am not alone this morning. My friend, "Lamby", is here with me. He – or she – you can never really be sure with stuffed animals . . . Lamby was given to me by a young parishioner several years ago; and while she normally resides on my office bookcase, he accompanied me here this morning as a reminder that this Fourth Sunday of Easter carries the unofficial title of 'Good

Shepherd Sunday'. This is due to the fact that, in all three years of the lectionary, the Gospel assigned for this day always speaks of Jesus as the 'Good Shepherd', an often-used image in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

If we were to lay the three Good Shepherd Gospel lessons side-by-side, what we notice first is that all the Good Shepherd Sunday texts come from John's Gospel. Then, in reading the lessons, we would see that the text designated for this year is by far the most abstract. Jesus clearly has something he wants to communicate to his followers – both then and now - but his layers of symbolism are so dense that it's difficult to understand what he means beyond the obvious. In fact, John even tells us outright that this particular text is going to take some drilling down: "Jesus used this figure of speech," the gospel author writes, "but the disciples did not understand what he was saying to them." And even 2,000 years later, neither might we.

Through the centuries, and down to the present day, this text has often been used as a means of exclusion. Jesus says, "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." People have used this saying to enforce false boundaries to shore up their own power, labeling as the "thieves and bandits" anyone who is "unorthodox," whether that means you have the "wrong" gender, sexuality, race, doctrine, nationality, belief, politics, liturgy or worship style – whatever or whomever they want to keep out. "Not everyone will be saved," is the message some will always take away from this text – meaning "everyone not like us will not be saved". Drill down a bit further, and we will find that "Jesus doesn't love everyone, especially not *them*" is the subliminal – but far more honest – attitude underlying the pious concern of those who are "correct," those who are a bit more "pure," those who know themselves to be on the "right side."

An honest assessment of our human nature will reveal that the farther we are driven into places of anger and fear, the harder it is to see any shades of subtlety. When we feel threatened, we will very quickly sink into black and white thinking. All shades of gray are rendered invisible or labeled as invalid or inappropriate by our primal drive for security. Everything becomes more fixed, more rigid, more set, more concrete - and suddenly we come to love Jesus' image of the sheepfold that is surely meant to keep some people – those *other* people – out; when what we really mean is that it will keep those of us Jesus has chosen to be “on the inside” safe and secure. We will convince ourselves that we have a holy and secure isolation from those *other* people, who will forever be locked out, separated from us, and no longer pose a threat. In this circle-the-wagons mentality, everything and everyone becomes rigidly locked into place. We imprison ourselves and everyone around us into roles of “good guy” and “bad guy.” There is very little freedom in that place – and even less compassion and empathy, precious little tolerance and understanding, and even less grace and love.

But, let's go back to the Gospel. When we first read it, especially if we are feeling vulnerable, threatened and longing for security, all we can see and imagine are walls, barriers, boundaries. That's what a fence - even one with a gate is - right? Something that maintains and ensures separation, and difference, and distance. But that is not what Jesus says. Jesus says nothing about a fence. “I am the gate,” he says.

While the first image that may come to mind is a wall or barrier, when we return to Jesus' actual words, it is not the fence, but the gate in the fence, that he calls to our attention. “I am the gate,” Jesus says.

So, stop and think for a moment. What is the purpose of a gate? It's primary purpose is to create an opening, a break in the fence. It allows travel through the wall. It is a means of liberation and movement, not exclusion and security. When Jesus says, “I am the gate,” it is his way of inviting us both to come inside, and travel outside. He is telling us that

he is our way into the security of the enclosure, to enter a restful place where we can know we are loved and protected. But the Jesus gate allows both ingress and egress, both a way in - and a way out. And it is outside the wall that we find the best pasture, it is outside where the good shepherd leads us, outside is where we will be fed and nourished.

“I am the gate.” We are being both invited inside, and also told that we will need to go back out through that same gate into the world. It is Jesus’ invitation to leave safety and security behind on occasion and go . . . go out into a world of green pastures and still waters, a world of challenges and stumbling blocks.

We might expect that of Jesus — expect him to tell us that we are safe, but that there is more to life than safety. We could understand that he does promise us sanctuary, but he also expects us to go back out and do the good work we are called to do, knowing that it may sometimes end with us feeling battered and bruised.

But where Jesus really gets subversive is when he calls himself, identifies and defines himself, as the gate. He’s not just saying, “There is a gate in all your carefully constructed, self-isolating walls.” He’s saying, “*I am the gate* in all your carefully constructed, self-isolating walls.”

That means that everything we may set up and label as a barrier is, in fact, broken open by Jesus. Everything we build up to protect ourselves and lock us safely away is actually undermined by Jesus, who calls us not just in – to a life of assured safety; but also out - to a life of adventure, possibility, and yes, sometimes, strife and conflict.

And those carefully constructed walls we place between ourselves and others? In every wall we build, Jesus builds a gate. He makes for himself an entrance into our hardened hearts, and through that entry, all kinds of *other* people – *other* sheep – *other* children of God - are also going to

get in and join us. When we fully understand that Jesus is not the fence, but the gate — understand that Jesus is the entry point into all that is safe and secure, but also all change, depth, struggle, and love — when we understand that, it can be simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating. As the saying goes, “God loves us exactly as we are, and God loves us far too much to leave us that way.”

Martin Laird, in his book, *“Into the Silent Land,”* tells a powerful story: He speaks of walking across the English moors with a friend who brings along his four dogs. As the two men walk, three of the dogs run on ahead, out across the moor, leaping over creeks and chasing rabbits, and joyfully enjoying and exploring this place they have been brought. But the fourth dog would not join the others. The fourth dog would only run in a small circle, right in front of his owner. No matter how many miles they walked or how far afield the other dogs went, this dog would only run in a tight circle, always staying very close to the men. Laird asked his friend why, and he replied, “Prior to coming to me, this dog was always kept in a very small cage. His body, as you can plainly see, has left the cage, but his mind still carries it with him. For him, the world outside the cage does not exist, and so no matter how big and beautiful the moor, he will never run out across it. I bring him here so he can breathe the fresh air, but he’s still running circles in his cage.”

On a good day, when we’re feeling confident, and happy, and safe in God’s love, seeing the glory of God in the diversity of all God’s people, and the wonder of God’s creation all around us, the shades of gray and the adventure of the open moors are beautiful. We can set aside the comforting security of black and white thinking and dive into the shadowland between. In those times, gray represents possibility, opportunity, and unexplored joys and surprises. We can handle and even appreciate nuance, subtlety, and ambiguity. But when we are hurting, weary, anxious, threatened, afraid, not only can we no longer see the shades of gray, we no longer want to. We are the dog who carries the cage with him out onto the open moor. We think, and will

convince ourselves, that we're keeping ourselves safe. We think we're secure "on the inside", when really, we've become our own jailers. We refuse to see, may even feel threatened by, the open gate in our hearts. And we refuse to see Jesus.

One of the great truths contained in the Good News of Our Risen Lord is that Jesus is patient with our willful blindness. He assures all of us, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved; and will come in and go out and find pasture."

Sometimes we may wish there were no gate. Sometimes we may wish, perhaps even hope, that the barriers and boundaries, the walls and fences we place around our hearts were impenetrable. But before long, God reminds us of that aching hole in our hearts, where insight, and possibility, and all of these people – these other, beautiful, flawed people – mirrors of ourselves - keep sneaking in through the Jesus gate. That break in our hearts, that place of entry – and exit - in the wall . . . that is the very presence of Jesus who leads us out into the world to enjoy the green pastures, and then brings us home to rest beside the still waters.

"I am the gate," Jesus says. The gate that is always open. For you. For everyone.

And for that hope and that promise, we must say: Alleluia! Amen.