

Easter 4, Year A
May 3, 2020
St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church
John 10:1-10
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson

“Hear, Know, Follow”

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is perhaps the very first image of Christ that I knew and became familiar with. It is probably because the church I grew up going to every Sunday, St. James Presbyterian Church in Jenks, OK, had only one stained glass window, which depicted Jesus as the Good Shepherd. With its simple Georgian red brick architecture and clean white walls, my home church’s sanctuary wasn’t grand or particularly ornate, but it was always bright and warm, and situated in the front of the sanctuary there was always Jesus the Good Shepherd looking over us all in our time of worship. My best friend, Erin, remembers when she was about 5 years old and it was her first time to stay in worship for “big Church” rather than go back for Children’s Church, that I, being the very mature and wise 6 year old, was giving her tips and advice on how you were supposed to act during big church. Apparently I told her that it was customary to look either at the big wooden cross on the front wall of the sanctuary or at the Good Shepherd Window just above it whenever the preacher or liturgist was at the pulpit, because no one looked directly at the speaker while they were talking.

St. James was a second home to me, by the time I could walk on my own I knew where all the best toys were located and where all the hiding places were – even scaring my parents on a few occasions when they couldn’t find me when it was time to go home. All my best friends were there and there were never any lack of laps to sit on or arms to pick me up and hold me. In many ways the congregation at St. James Presbyterian Church raised me, just as much as my parents did. So it is no wonder that the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd has become such an important one to me as it is very much tied to a place where I was cared for and safe and to a people who loved me and were the first to demonstrate God’s love for me.

In times of stress, difficulty, and uncertainly, like we are living now, it’s good and important for us to return to these familiar and comforting images, whatever they may be, that remind us of God’s love and care for us. The images found in today’s passage are part of the

many “I Am” statements made by Jesus in the gospel of John. In these statements Jesus claims to be the very things needed for life to not only survive, but to thrive – water, bread of life, light of the world, and here shelter and safety. These “I am” statements reveal both who God is and who Jesus is as the incarnation of God.

Today we get a little bit of a mixed metaphor, Jesus starts out by talking about a Shepherd and his sheep, and then when the disciples look confused about what he is trying to say, he goes on to say “I am the gate” as if that makes things crystal clear now. It’s mental puzzler that many commentators have tried to explain – Is Jesus both the shepherd and the gate? I mean a gate is an inanimate object, one that doesn’t even move itself (well at least not in Jesus’ time). One such commentator provides this explanation, as he notes that “while doing some research in the Middle East, the Bible commentator ran across an Arab shepherd. This shepherd was not a Christian and did not know the Bible. But he was a keeper of sheep and so was showing off his flock as well as the penned-in area where his sheep slept every night. “And when they go in there,” the shepherd said proudly, “they are perfectly safe.” But then the scholar noticed something. “Your sheep sleep in that pen and yet I just noticed that the pen does not have a gate on it.”

“Yes, that’s right,” the shepherd replied, “I am the gate.”

“What do you mean?” the man asked in startled wonder.

“After my sheep are in the pen, I lay my body across the opening. No sheep will step over me and no wolf can get in without getting past me first. I am the gate.”¹

This is perhaps one of many understandings of Jesus as both shepherd and gate. Ultimately, along with being a symbol for safety, security, and protection, these images are also about belonging and about the deep trusting relationship that exists between the shepherd and his sheep. While this passage is sometimes used to justify the determination of who’s in and who’s out of the sheepfold, that’s not necessarily what’s going on here. There are no bad sheep or good sheep, there aren’t even sheep who are outside of the pen, the relationship with the shepherd is assumed, the sheep are simply the shepherd’s own. This lesson is less about the action of the sheep than the action and care of the shepherd. The shepherd calls the sheep by

¹ https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-4a-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

name, leads them out, and goes ahead of them. The plans and intentions of the shepherd are clear, while the thieves and bandits come only to steal, kill, and destroy, the shepherd has come that his sheep may have life and have it abundantly.

This abundant life is rooted in relationship. Because of the trusting care built between the shepherd and his flock, the sheep in turn hear the shepherd's voice, know the shepherd's voice, and follow the shepherd where he leads. Now here is where I wish Jesus didn't sound so confident that the sheep would only hear and heed the shepherd's voice, because it seems to me that there are lot of voices in our lives and in the world that grab our attention, and pull us away from the voice of the shepherd. How many advertisements are we exposed to on daily basis? Hundreds? Thousands? Without us even realizing? How man messages of success and wealth, and the "good life" do we take in that have nothing to do with real relationships and have everything to do with a particular brand of clothing, coffee, electronics, vehicles, you name it. Who are those other voices in our lives? Who are the thieves and bandits who promise us an abundant life but leave us with destruction and death? And how can we again hear the voice of the shepherd leading us home?

We can easily fool ourselves into thinking that we are "free range" sheep, that we don't need a shepherd. But when we find ourselves in situations and circumstances where all that carefully curated control goes out the window, the truth reveals itself. We are just as helpless as any other sheep. We need the shepherd's care and guidance. We also remember that we are a part of larger flock, our well-being is tied to the well-being of all the other sheep. Following our shepherd, Jesus, means acknowledging and resting in this reality. It also means following Jesus' final command to his disciples. Before he was betrayed, arrested and eventually crucified, Jesus left his followers with this commandment – that "you love one another, as I have loved you." The life abundant is lived in relationship, as we listen to and trust more and more everyday the voice of Jesus and imitate his loving care in our communal life as a church and in our individuals lives as we are lead out by our shepherd who goes before us in everything.