

First Presbyterian Church
John 10:1-10, “The Good Shepherd”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 5/7/2017

Life can feel chaotic at times, right?

It can feel like things are spinning out of control,
like the frenzied pace will never end,
like the expectation levels keep increasing from our families,
friends, jobs, and churches.

Big picture we worry about everything from terrorist attacks
to climate change to political polarization to protests
to North Korea and Syria.

In our personal lives we have health concerns, the death of loved ones,
hardships at work, financial concerns,
and all the work that needs to be done around the house.

And at church (even at a perfect church like First Pres)
we worry about a whole other set of concerns from one end
of congregational life to another.

It can be a lot, right?

To a large degree, the systems that we operate in –
from our family system, our church system, our national and global systems
– teach us to respond reactively to all this anxiety.

In fact, there are many – even in the church –
who will try to capitalize on instability, vulnerability,
and disruption in order to line their own pockets.

We see this in 24 hour cable news channels, Facebook memes,
talk radio conspiracy theories, rumor mills, fad diets, pop psychology,
self-help theology, cliché Bible answers,
people telling you to feel guilty and ashamed:
These things do not lead us toward life with the Good Shepherd,
but toward lives driven downward by assumptions of fear and scarcity.

But this reactivity and the attempts to capitalize on it
does not come from the Good Shepherd.

According to Jesus, these are the voices of thieves and robbers,
trying to gain access to the community of faith by an unauthorized channel.

Now: I invite you to close your eyes. Take a deep breath.
Imagine yourself in a large, warm, covered room together
with people you know and love. You are safe and secure.
One by one, you walk out of the enclosure
through an opening framed with massive oak beams.
You go past the large and secure gate that has been swung open.
You hear your name spoken by a voice who knows and loves you,
and continue out into a large field on a sunny day.

Take another deep breath.

Smell the grass, the flowers, the breeze.
This is the place where you are safe and able to be restored.
This is where you can flourish. This is life with the Good Shepherd.

Have you been here before?

Could you find your way here again?

Open your eyes.

In John 9, which we looked at about a month ago,
the Pharisees were interrogating a man born blind
who had been healed by Jesus.
“How were you healed? Who did this? Where did he come from?
Don’t you know this is the Sabbath? Where are your parents?”

They were trying to deconstruct and discredit the ministry of Jesus.

And so in John 10, Jesus says, “Amen!”

(Notice that Jesus starts with an Amen,
we end our prayers with an Amen,
but it means the same thing: This is the truth!)

“Amen! I tell you Pharisees, anybody trying to sneak in is a thief or a robber.
The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.”

He describes a series of relationships: The sheep pen, with a gate.
The sheep inside the pen. Thieves trying to sneak in.
A gate keeper who knows the true shepherd.
And the shepherd of the sheep.

In v. 3 we learn that “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him.”

This implies a large farm, where there is a hired hand
who is able to watch over the gate and prevent any unauthorized entry.

The verse continues, “and the sheep listen to his voice.
He calls his own sheep by name and lead them out.”

In 2004 I had opportunity to visit South Africa for three weeks
with couple of students from my church
– Vancouver Korean Presbyterian Church.

We mostly spent time in a shanty town outside of Cape Town,
but for about a week we visited a remote area in the middle of the country
known as the Transkei.

While there we stayed with a family that lived in traditional ways
that go back many hundreds and probably thousands of years.

The buildings were made of mud bricks with thatched roofs,
and the floors were made of ... I kid you not ... polished cow dung.

They did not smell, they were shiny, smooth, and apparently quite hygienic...
though I'm not sure I'd eat off of them.

These people were farmers, and they lived in a neighborhood with other farmers.
Their sheep pen was adjacent to the home,
but during the daytime, they simply let the sheep roam as they pleased
on the grassy fields that surrounded the home.

No fences, no branding, just sheep out in the field—
dozens of them, and even up close they all looked pretty much the same.

The interesting thing was that all the other farmers did the same thing.

No fences, no branding, just sheep out in the field,
mingling together as they wished.

I asked them, “How do you get the sheep to come back?
And how do you know whose sheep are whose?”

A young boy answered, “Oh, the sheep know our voice.
We just call them and they come back to us.
And we can recognize the sheep just by looking at them.
I can tell you which sheep are the children of another.”

And so I came to understand the fourth verse:
“When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them,
and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

It is essential that we who have faith in Jesus take time to listen to his voice.
We must sit at his feet, soak in his teaching, become accustomed
to the pattern and rhythm of his speech,
recognize the tone and inflexion that is uniquely his.

But the Pharisees didn't understand what he was telling them.

Is John portraying the Pharisees as unnecessarily obtuse?
Were they really so slow to catch on to a metaphor
about shepherd, sheep, thieves, and robbers?

People usually aren't keen on analogies that put them in league with
thieves and robbers, so it might be a kind of, “Excuse me?
You couldn't be saying what it sounds like you're saying, right?”

Whatever the case,
Jesus switches things up for them.
In v. 7 he says, “AMEN! I am the gate.
Whoever enters through me will be saved.”

This is one of many “I am” statements by Jesus in the gospel of John.

In 6:35, “I am the bread of life.”

In 8:58, “Before Abraham was born, I am!”

In 9:5, “I am the light of the world.”

In 11:25, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

In 14:6, “I am the way, truth, life.”

And in the verse immediately following our reading today,

John 10:11 ... “I am...the Good Shepherd.”

In saying, “I am,” Jesus is bringing to mind the divine name,
“YHWH,” revealed to Moses through the burning bush.

You might recall that Moses asked God’s name,
and God said, “I am who I am.”

Faithful shepherds – as the Pharisees thought themselves to be – would recognize
the intimate connection between Jesus and I Am.

They would not claim to know another way out of this mess,
an escape that rejects passage through the Gate.

In his rebuke of the Pharisees,

Jesus is surely drawing on imagery from the Prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 34:

**Prophecy against the shepherds of Israel; prophecy and say to them:
‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel
who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the
flock? 3You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter
the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4You have not
strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured.**

**11‘For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for
my sheep and look after them. 12As shepherds look after their scattered
flocks when they are with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will
rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of
clouds and darkness. ... I will tend them in a good pasture.’**

I myself will search for my sheep, I Am says.

And now here comes Jesus saying, “I am...the Gate”

“I am...the Good Shepherd.”

There is an exclusive claim being made by Jesus here,
and I think it follows that sub-shepherds or sheep-dogs that follow
in Jesus' footsteps should also adhere to it.
There isn't any other way than to pass through the Gate.
There isn't any other safe shepherd to follow than the Good Shepherd.

I think we can make this claim along with Jesus without becoming judgmental
or controlling when it comes to the inevitable questions that follow.

“What about people who never heard about Jesus?
What about people who are so good and loving and self-sacrificial,
but don't believe in Jesus?
What about people who are born into different religious systems
where they never have a real opportunity to accept Christ?”

These are worthy questions, and they aren't well served by simple answers.
However they are answered, if we are going to remain
people who accept the testimony of Jesus about himself,
our answers will find their way back to Jesus.
He is the Gate. He is the Good Shepherd.

These comments from Jesus are not only about exclusivity, however.
They are also about posture, tone, and a way of relating.
Jesus chooses to adopt the image of Shepherd here,
and that sets us off on a unique track.

Shepherds are caretakers, defenders, leaders down the path, physically connected,
and not in anyway prestigious or self-important.
They stink and run and get banged up,
they play and work and understand the simple rhythms
of the land they walk alongside their sheep.

If this is our vision of Jesus, we are invited into a certain way of relating to him,
and of living out his words.

Molly Marshall writes that “In the iconography of the church, by the fourth century Jesus as shepherd was gradually replaced by Jesus as Pantocrator, the elevated ruler over all, as Constantine united the church with the secular state. As the church became an expression of imperial power, the shepherd’s staff was replaced with a gilded crozier; a crown of thorns was displaced by the triple tiara of the pope. Recovering shepherding imagery could call the church to simplicity, sacrifice, and solidarity – needed in a time when many have lost their way.”

CONCLUSION

Are we not in such a time?

What difference might it make for you to soak in this image
of Jesus as Good Shepherd?

How would you go about your decision making and conversations
if you understood yourself to be a sheep in God’s flock?

What grace might you open yourself up to if you took a moment
to imagine yourself being led from the holding pen out into a field
to simply be who you have been made to be?