

## **WORSHIP APRIL 26 - John Duntley**

### **John 10:1-10**

#### **The Good Shepherd- I am the Gate**

As we learn to appreciate Jesus through Bible scripture and Bible study, we come to know that many of his teachings come in the form of parables. Although today's scripture of the Good Shepherd is not formally considered a parable by many theologians it certainly has the perspective of one. Of the two dozen recognized parables, we may be more familiar with some over others; the prodigal son, the mustard seed, the good Samaritan, the lost sheep, many take the same voice of the story in today's Gospel by sharing the form of Jesus teaching through story and metaphor. Of course, the other important learning we have in studying the Bible is that so often, the stories that are being told by Jesus or the disciples come to have an important and relevant meaning in our own lives thousands of years later.

#### **We Are the Sheep**

John's Gospel in chapter 10 that we just heard read this morning, starts right off quoting Jesus. Jesus is telling this story of the sheep. Of course, his description of the sheep is intended to represent the people; his metaphor casts the sheep as people. As he describes the sheep, their pen, the gate, the bandits he becomes frustrated that the people listening do not understand his meaning; in verse 6 "they did not understand what he was saying." His message was so important that he repeated the most important part of the message that he was the gate to salvation, verse 9 "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved". The fact that sheep and shepherds were so common in time of Jesus it seems surprising that his metaphor was not understood. It could be that they failed to comprehend his message because of some spiritual deafness. Would we even be able to catch his meaning if he was speaking with us today? Might we just be awed by his presence? So what was he saying?

To educate our modern minds, the story describes a sheep pen. Jesus calls it a sheepfold. A sheepfold could be a pen with a fence or wall and a wooden gate or it could be makeshift pen out in the hills contained by tree branches, shrubs or rock walls. Out in the countryside, the gate is the shepherd himself who lies across the opening to protect the sheep from dangers or from escape. It is the shepherd that leads the sheep out of the pen, opening the gate, talking to the sheep and as they hear his familiar voice they follow.

Sheep feel safe being in tight groups, avoiding predators. They are accustomed to following a leader sheep or shepherd and they frighten very easily. The shepherd often walks alongside the group of sheep in the opposite direction of where he wants them to go. The shepherd spends long days and sometimes nights in the field and either carries food along or has someone to bring supplies. In some cases, several shepherds may have bedded their flocks in the same pen and as they go out in the morning the sheep will only follow the familiar voice of their shepherd. When the sheep returned to the sheepfold at the end of their grazing day it was the shepherd that observed each sheep, tending to any bramble scratches, anointing any wounds, providing water if they were thirsty. When the flock was all in the shepherd minded the gate or became the gate so no harm could come to the sheep. If a sheep wandered off or got separated that shepherd would not rest until he found that stray sheep and returned it to the flock; this is retold in the Parable of the Lost Sheep. In many parts of the world this simple subsistence method of sheep herding likely still exists much like it did in the days of Jesus.

In John 10:7, 'So again, Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate of the sheep", so if people are the sheep, Jesus is their shepherd, leading them, protecting them and healing their wounds. This was the message Jesus was starting this story with and it should bring us comfort today as well. Just as the shepherd in this scripture took loving care of his sheep, tending to their injuries and protecting them from all hazard, Jesus was reminding them that he was lovingly caring for their wellbeing. As much as Jesus was telling his story to his people, he wanted them to be assured that he was their guardian and salvation and in much the same way, that same kinship holds to our faith today. Jesus can show up for each of us in our daily lives, our ups and downs, our moments of need. We can rely on His grace lifting and protecting us. If we stray from our path, Jesus will be welcoming us back to the flock.

## **Keeping Evil Away**

At the beginning of John 10:1 Jesus implored, "Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by another way is a thief and bandit." In the sheepfold the pen was to keep the sheep protected from intruders, most commonly predators that may roam

the hills, like wolves, coyotes, and perhaps thieves that would like to take off with a stray sheep. Jesus in his metaphor, was looking at those bandits as any other prophet, leader or false messiah that may “steal away” or “damage” the spirit of his sheep, his people, his beloved followers. He wanted to be sure that his people were not swayed or disillusioned by any other religious or government authority. Even if non-believers entered the community it could be disruptive for believers in their daily lives. Keeping out evil intruders or evil spirits keeps the people safe. In John 10:10 he says, <sup>10</sup>”The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.”

We can imagine in Jesus’s world, there were all kinds of believers and unbelievers. There were other religious leaders that were upset with his teachings and political leaders that were bothered by the attention and the popular following that he created. The Easter story that we have celebrated this month, illustrates these very warnings about the religious and political authorities influence and power that eventually led to Jesus’ death on the cross.

While these fears and challenges may have been a concern in the time of Jesus, they may still be of concern for all time. In our world today there are a wide range of modern day pundits and religious leaders that may be seeking to win our favor. There is political discourse that proclaims many different and opposing facts or truths about news in the world. There are some that may fit comfortably into our own beliefs, but there are so many that appear on social media or have their own podcasts, it can be hard to separate the good from the radical or evil. It is wise for us to remember the words of Jesus, “that I am the gate of the sheep.” If we can simply keep our eyes and ears on the messages that Jesus has sent through Biblical stories we may be able to keep away from the far flung interpretations that some speak to.

## **The Gate to Heaven**

As Jesus describes his keeping of the gate, it is both to keep us safe and it may also be a reference to our salvation, to reaching the kingdom of heaven through his gate. John 10:9 “I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture.” Jesus was devoted to the salvation and health of his people, his sheep, us. Believing in his watchful protection the people can experience the best that life can offer.

Both for people in the time of Jesus and for us today, hearing that promise truly seals our faith and belief in Jesus as the savior. This Easter season we have been celebrating offers that very powerful witness of the resurrection. Having faith that if we believe in God's mercy we too will enter the gate and achieve resurrection.

If we read even a couple of verses further in John 10:11 we hear Jesus proclaim <sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd is the only one that will lay down his life for sheep." He goes on to say that he is the shepherd. He has all of our problems, pressures, and provisions under his control, and that nothing we face is ever too difficult for him to handle. So cast your cares upon him because you can be sure that he will help you. And as we know, Jesus DID lay his life down so that we may live.

As we ponder the messages from today's scripture we should find grace in knowing that Jesus is our shepherd, that He keeps us from harm or evil and that in following him, through his gate, we find salvation. AMEN