

Sermon for Easter IV Year A 2020
The Figure in the Figure of Speech

In the gospel for this morning, Jesus is using one figure of speech after another, but . . . as the evangelist tells us
“they did not understand what he was saying to them.”

Has that ever happened to you?

Have you ever listened to the gospel reading and then said to yourself,
“What is he talking about?”

Have you ever read a piece of scripture and wondered,
“What does this mean?

How does this apply to my life?”

I certainly have and still do.

Nearly every week, that’s my starting place with the upcoming Sunday’s readings and gospel.

This week . . . was no different.

Sheep and shepherd,

gate and gatekeeper,

thief and bandit,

familiar and strange voices,

abundant life . . .

what does all that mean?

There are so many contradictions and mixed metaphors.

How can we put it all together in a way that makes any sense?

No wonder “they” did not understand what he was saying.

No kidding!

At the beginning of this morning’s gospel it sounds as if Jesus is suggesting that he is the shepherd who enters the gate, unlike the thieves and bandits who hop the fence.

The sheep, he says, listen to and follow the voice of the shepherd but run from the voice of strangers.

But then later in the same gospel reading, Jesus says that he is the gate.

So . . . he is the shepherd who enters the gate
And he is also the gate the shepherd enters?
And then . . . he says that we can enter him as a gate to abundant life?

It reminds me of the stories my husband tells
of his high school Spanish teacher
who used to mash up American figures of speech and say things like:
“we’ll have to cross that bridge when it hatches” or
“someone is playing too close to a gas station with matches.”
Clearly, he knew the American figures of speech like:
We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it or
Don’t count your eggs until they hatch.
He fractured and combined these well-known figures of speech—
but in so doing, he made an impression.
Yes, we laugh at the mixed metaphors and yet . . .
we remember them.
Joe and I use his old Spanish teacher’s
mixed up, mashed up figures of speech all the time . . .
true, mainly as a joke
but also because they oddly intensify
the meaning of the figure of speech.
I believe that is just what Jesus is doing in today’s gospel.

I say that because St. John, today’s gospel writer,
clearly states that Jesus was using a “figure of speech.”
That’s why this text,
like so many of Jesus’ sayings and teachings,
is difficult to understand without keeping in mind
that Jesus is using language to teach about something that,
frankly, is somewhat beyond language—
in this case, who he is --- and what he does.

So, the first thing we need to keep in mind is
that this text is not meant to be taken literally.
It would make no sense.

A figure of speech *points beyond itself*,
in this case to abundant life.

A figure of speech asks us to think, see, and listen differently.
So, for this morning,
what I would like to do is consider Jesus' figure of speech
"I am the gate" which is repeated twice
along with the promise of life and life abundantly.

It's tempting to read this passage
from a place of complacency and privilege.
That is to picture ourselves automatically as "insiders,"
snug inside the sheepfolds who are "allowed in"
behind the fenced-in enclave.
It's tempting to think we're never the sheep
who heed the stranger's seductive voice.
Or that we never resort to deceptive shortcuts
instead of "entering through the gate."
That we never play the role of bandit or thief in other people's lives.
Or that we unerringly follow the lead of the shepherd.

But I don't think Jesus is saying all of this
either to stump us or flatter us.
I think the purpose of this passage is to reveal Jesus to us—
the "figure" if you will of the figure of speech—
which is one of the keys to understanding John's gospel—
the revelation of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh.
So . . . yes, Jesus the Good Shepherd offers us guidance,
nurture, protection . . . and so much more.

Jesus says—"I am the gate"—in this passage twice.
And as I thought about that,
it suddenly occurred to me that gates
not only close one in but they swing open.

Jesus says, “*I am the gate*”—
not I am the wall or the barrier or the enclosure or the dividing line.
Jesus says, *I am the gate* . . .
not, “I am that which separates, isolates, segregates, or imprisons.”
I am the gate.
I am the door.
I am the opening.
I am the passageway.
I am the place where freedom begins.
*I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved,
and will come in and go out and find pasture.*

Needless to say, most of us don’t associate “gates” with freedom.
We think of bars and locks and alarms and enclosures.
We imagine toddler gates, or, perhaps, puppy training gates.
Prison gates and “gated communities.”
But what if Jesus is thinking of a different kind of gate?
A gate that opens out instead of closing in?
Not the barrier itself, but the opening it offers?
A place of release?
A movement?
An opening to spaciousness and liberty and abundance?
*I am the gate.
Whoever enters by me will be saved,
and will come in and go out and find pasture.*

Sadly, historically this chapter of John’s gospel
has been often interpreted in ways that have harmed people.
It has been used to emphasize who “is in” and who “is out”
when it comes to God and God’s flock.
For centuries, much of the Church has read it
as biblical proof that Jesus won’t love or save people
who don’t look, act, think, pray, love or worship
in the same ways as . . . oh say, Lutherans do,
or Roman Catholics do, or Greek Orthodox do . . . the list could go on.

But, in fact, this passage, at its heart,
is not about limitations or scarcity at all.
It's not about the stinginess of God,
and it's not about the self-protective walls
we like to build and hide behind.
Keep in mind—Jesus is the gate. We're not.
Gatekeeping is not our job.

No, this passage is about life.
Life that pushes across formidable boundaries.
Life that flourishes in precarious places.
Life that never denies the real threat of thieves, bandits, and strangers—
And yet holds out the possibility of pasture—
of nourishment, protection and rest.

Life that perseveres
and maybe even thrives in the valley of the shadow of death.
Life that reaches through any opening it can find—however small—
however fragile, however tenuous, and insists on generous self-giving:
This is my body, given for you.
This is my blood, shed for you.

Some historians argue that shepherds in Jesus' day
often placed themselves across the openings of their sheepfolds
during times of danger,
literally offering up their bodies for their flocks.
So think on the “figure” in these “figures of speech”:
Jesus as shepherd.
Jesus as gate.
Jesus as sacrificial lamb, standing between us and death, slain for us.

Perhaps the questions we need to ask about this passage
aren't code breaking questions about mixed or mashed up
figures of speeches.

Perhaps we need to ask more personal questions like,
“What is it in me that resists the open gate?”
“Where in my life am I walled off, closed to change,
averse to movement, risk, freedom, joy?”
“What flock do I belong to?”
“Whose voice do I follow most readily?”
“What calls to me, making seductive promises I shouldn’t trust?”
“Do I know the shepherd well enough to recognize his call?”
“Am I willing to leave the fold in order to find pasture,
or am I too complacent, scared, suspicious, and jaded
to experience the risk of abundant life?”

In the coming weeks, many of us will face these questions
in the very particular context of the coronavirus pandemic
and its aftermath.

And we will have to discern when and how
we will open the gates of our doors and society
and step back out into our communities . . .
keeping in mind that, just as Jesus our Good Shepherd tells us,
we will be contending with thieves and hired hands
who do not have our best interest or the common good in mind.
Freedom and abundance bring both risk and responsibility.

Jesus—the gate—opens the way for us.
Jesus—the gate—is unlocked and wide open,
inviting us to be nurtured and guided
by God’s saving love for the world—
freely and abundantly given—both inside and outside the gate.
Grace is boundless
and so is Christ’s love for you and me and all the world.

We may not be able to figure it all out, but bear with these figures of speech and seek to find the “figure” in the center of all of them:

Christ, the lamb of God, is the Good Shepherd.

In dying he gave us eternal life.

Christ is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the ending.

His familiar voice calls to us today and says:

I am the gate.

I have come not to condemn the world but to save the world.

I have come to give life and life abundantly.