

## SERMON

JOHN 10:1-10

THE ALMIGHTY I AM: WHERE TRUE LIFE IS FOUND

SUNDAY, 3 MAY 2026

FPCGJ

### Opening Prayer

This week: we are continuing with a sermon series that is focused on a special part of John's Gospel: the "I AM" statements of Jesus. As we have heard in each week of this series, what the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) whisper about Jesus, John's Gospel *shouts* from the rooftops:

### Jesus is God.

One of the clearest ways that John's Gospel declares is through seven "I AM" statements in the Gospel. As we have heard, the words "I AM" are a callback to the Exodus account, in which God spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush:

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*But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall*

*say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.*

So, every time we encounter one of the I AM statements in the Gospel of John, we are *meant* to connect it with this passage from Exodus, and we are *meant* to understand that Jesus is God—full stop.

So far, we have encountered two of the I AM statements:

I AM the bread of life

Last week, Tom led us through the second I AM – I AM the light of the world. If you haven’t had a chance to listen to it, I strongly encourage you to do so.

In his sermon, Tom reminded us that when Jesus spoke this second “I AM”, it was during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, when the Temple in Jerusalem would have been filled with blazing sources of light. It was in that context that Jesus declared that he is the true source of light—light that comforts, but also light that exposes—calling us to submit our whole lives, even the parts we hide and the parts we try to control, to his Lordship. And once that light shows us what is true, the question becomes: where do we go from there?

The answer: we go to John 10, to the next I AM statement – I AM the gate of/for the Sheep.

One of many notable things about this “I AM” statement is that it stands in very close proximity to the fourth “I AM” statement, which occurs only four short verses later: I AM the Good Shepherd.

These are distinct statements, each with their own powerful truth. But I think their proximity and their thematic relation (sheepgate and shepherd) also suggests that we are meant to understand them *together*. So, when we consider the gate of the sheep, let’s also keep the Good Shepherd in mind, and vice versa. With that said, let’s take a closer look at today’s text of John 10:1-10, starting with the first verse.

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*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.*

One of the first questions we can ask is, “to whom is Jesus talking?” If we look at what comes right before this passage in John 9, Jesus was having a lengthy dispute with the Pharisees, who were part of the Jewish religious leadership of the time. So, if we pair the end of John 9 with the beginning of John 10, we read this:

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*Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you*

*would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains. 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."*

This reads very differently when connected to the end of John 9!

To put it bluntly, this opening verse of John 10 is a strong warning against false teachers, especially against those who distort and twist scripture and harm the church for their own gain.

I think we can say that Jesus is being incredibly intentional in this opening imagery. What kind of space is the thief and bandit trying to enter? **A sheepfold.** Now, sheep are reasonably intelligent creatures (their lack of intelligence is a myth). They have strong memories (they can remember travel routes and recognize familiar voices) and they have high social intelligence. But they are also scared easily and are *incredibly* vulnerable.

Let's see: Intelligent; good memory; socially intelligent; scares easily; and incredibly vulnerable. It seems like sheep have a lot in common with human beings!

Left to our own devices, Christians are incredibly vulnerable. When I was university, one of my teachers—a professor of Christian history—was fond of telling his classes that the church has been under siege for most of its history, with only brief periods of respite. In every age and time, the church has had to contend with all kinds

of forces aligned against the reign of God, which Paul called “the rulers...the authorities...the cosmic powers of this present darkness...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12).

Quite often, Satan and these cosmic powers of evil assail the church through human actors, through those who by falsehood and violence seek to bypass Jesus, and harm and even destroy the church.

One of the clearest examples of this is found in the church in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich, when Hitler and the German state attempted to reshape the church in its own image, to claim authority that did not belong to it.

And in that moment, a group of pastors and theologians (led by Karl Barth, whose birthday is in one week—happy birthday, Karl—140 years young) stood up and said: **no**.

Here is an excerpt of what Barth and his team wrote:

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*Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God's revelation.*

In what became known as the Barmen Declaration, they confessed that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God—and that no other voice, no other power, no other authority can take his place (you can also consider this a shameless plug for a class on the Barmen Declaration that I hope to teach in the fall).

In other words: there is only one gate, and there is only one shepherd, too. Jesus—and Jesus alone—is both.

And as Jesus continues, he begins to unfold this image even further.

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*The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.*

This is where the image begins to shift. Now Jesus begins to speak about something of great importance: voice. The sheep hear his voice. He calls them by name. He leads them out. They follow him because they know his voice. And they will not follow a stranger—because they do not recognize that voice.

In other words, this isn't just about access. It's about relationship. It's about recognition. It's about trust. The image presents something deeply personal—the voice of the shepherd. And that

matters, because it tells us that life with Christ is not just about getting in the right place. It's about being in the right relationship. It's about being known, and about learning, over time, to know him.

And the shepherd doesn't drive the sheep from behind. He goes ahead of them. He calls them. He leads them. And they follow—not out of fear, not out of coercion, but because they recognize his voice and trust where he is going. There is a kind of freedom in that image, but also a kind of dependence. The sheep are not navigating on their own. They are not charting their own path. They are responding to a voice that leads them forward.

Now, that raises an uncomfortable question for us. Do we actually know his voice? Not in theory, and not as something we only affirm on a Sunday morning. But do we know his voice in the real, everyday moments of our lives—and do we follow it?

Because the reality is, there are a lot of voices competing for our attention. Voices that promise life. Voices that claim authority. Voices that tell us what is true, what is good, what matters, what we should pursue, what we should fear. And those voices are not always obviously wrong. That's part of what makes this difficult.

Some of those voices sound familiar. Some of them sound reasonable. Some of them sound wise. Some of them even sound... good. They echo things we already believe. They align with our instincts. They affirm what we already want. And because of that,

they can be very difficult to distinguish from the voice of the shepherd.

But Jesus is very clear: the sheep do not follow a stranger. Not because the stranger isn't loud enough. Not because the stranger isn't persuasive enough. But because the sheep have learned the voice of the shepherd. They have spent enough time with him, listened closely enough, stayed near enough, that his voice becomes familiar—distinct—recognizable.

And that kind of recognition doesn't happen by accident. It doesn't happen quickly. It doesn't happen through occasional exposure. It comes from time. It comes from attention. It comes from a kind of closeness that is cultivated over days and weeks and years. It comes from hearing his voice in Scripture. It comes from learning his character. It comes from walking with him—especially in the ordinary and seemingly unremarkable parts of life.

And over time, something begins to shift. The more familiar his voice becomes, the more other voices begin to lose their authority. Not because they disappear—but because they are recognized for what they are. And when that happens, there is a kind of clarity that begins to take shape. Not perfect clarity. Not instant certainty. But enough to say: *that's not him*.

And then John gives us one more detail:

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*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

Even the people standing right in front of Jesus didn't get it. They heard the words. They saw the imagery. But they missed what he was saying. They could repeat the metaphor—but they could not receive the meaning.

And if we're honest, we're not all that different. Because it is entirely possible to hear Jesus' words—to know the language—to be familiar with the imagery—and still miss his voice. It is possible to be around the things of faith, to understand the structure, to recognize the patterns—and still not be listening in a way that leads to trust, and to following.

And that's where this image presses on us. Not just to understand it—but to respond to it. Not just to recognize the metaphor—but to ask whether we are actually listening for the voice of the shepherd... and whether we are willing to follow where he leads.

So Jesus says it again—this time more directly.

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*Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.*

They didn't understand the image the first time. So Jesus doesn't abandon it—he clarifies it and brings it into focus. The gate is not just an idea. It is not just a structure. The gate is a person—Jesus

himself. Which means that access to life with God is not something we build or achieve or figure out. It is something we receive by coming to him.

And then Jesus says something that presses even further:

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*All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.*

Once again, Jesus is naming the reality we have already begun to see. There are voices that claim authority, that promise life, that offer direction—but they do not pass through him. And the difference is not just in what they say, but in what they produce.

And then, in contrast, Jesus says:

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*I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.*

Notice how expansive that is. “Whoever enters.” There is no narrowing of invitation here. No hidden qualification. No inner circle. “Whoever enters by me will be saved.” There is safety here. There is rescue. There is a place where we are no longer exposed,

no longer left to fend for ourselves, no longer defined by every competing voice that demands our attention.

And not only that—we will come in and go out. There is freedom here. This is not confinement. When I was in university, I had a wonderful teacher who told us,

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*The Christian life is a fenced life – but Christ’s fence brings us true freedom. - Dr. Karen Peterson*

This fenced-in sheep pen is *not* restriction. The image is not of being locked away, but of living within a place of security that allows us to move, to live, to step out into the world and return again without fear. There is a steadiness to this life, a groundedness that does not depend on every changing circumstance.

And then Jesus brings it all together in one final contrast:

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*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

Everything in this passage leads here. The gate is not there to keep people out. The gate is there to bring people into life. Real life. True life. Not a thin version of it. Not a fragile version of it. Not a life

constantly shaped by fear or anxiety or the pressure to hold everything together on your own. But life that is full and rooted—the kind of life John speaks of from the very beginning... life that comes from him.

And that brings us back to the question we have been circling this entire time.

If there is one gate, one shepherd, and one voice that leads to life...

### **Are we listening?**

And not only that—if we hear it, are we willing to trust that voice enough to follow it? Will we release our grip on the voices that promise much but cannot give life, and entrust ourselves to the One who can?

Because this is not just a metaphor to understand. It is an invitation to receive.

And the promise is not that everything will suddenly become easy, or predictable, or free from difficulty. The promise is something deeper than that.

The promise is that in him, there is life—life abundant. And that is where this leaves us. Not simply with something to think about, not simply with something to agree with, but with a decision.

Will we remain where we are—listening to every other voice? Or will we hear him—*really* hear him—and follow?

Let's pray we will.