

Gates – Are You Coming or Going?©

John 10:1-10

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I know. This sermon title could actually be a question I'm asking myself. Gates ... are you coming or going? Sometimes I do feel like I'm meeting myself coming and going. When I worked for the Upper Room in Nashville, it wasn't out of the ordinary for me to travel someplace every weekend to do a training. I kind of was meeting myself coming and going. But the comfortable thing was – it felt kind of welcoming to be in the airport. I mean there were signs all over the place with my last name – Gates.

Okay. Enough silly stuff for now. I want you to think a moment about where you have seen gates. Have you ever lived in a gated community? Fred and I did, when we lived in Nashville. We lived in a lovely garden apartment and the grounds were truly beautiful. The complex had a large iron gate that opened and closed for us when we entered a security number into the keypad. If you didn't know the number, you were not going to get in. Unless you were a guest and called the resident you were visiting and they pushed the enter button from their apartment.

I felt very secure living in a place in the city where only people who were supposed to be inside could get inside. Except. Of course there were exceptions. If someone pulled behind a car with someone putting in the security code, when the gate opened there was plenty of time for the car in the back to follow the other one in. Even if they were not supposed to be there. Even if they did not know the secret code, they could slip in.

Those people who snuck in behind a legitimate person might be like the one Jesus talks about in this passage from John. Even though they are going through the gate, they are not doing it on the up and up. They might be the robbers and the thieves. They might be innocent people who just don't want to wait to call someone so they take advantage of the opened gate. But you get the idea, right?

Regardless of how many rules or how much security we have in place, there will always be those who manage to slip past.

Jesus talks about those who enter by some other way than the legitimate, honest way of going through the gatekeeper. He says he is the shepherd and the gatekeeper opens the gate for him. His sheep know his voice and they follow.

Dr. Ken Bailey spent many years in the Holy Land, studying and writing commentaries about scripture. One of the themes of his work was about Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Dr. Bailey told about how shepherds in the middle east are very tuned in to their sheep. Each shepherd has a particular whistle or call, and every sheep in their fold recognizes their own shepherd. They will not answer the call of any other shepherd.

At night, sometimes if they were close to a town, the shepherds would pay a gatekeeper to watch over their flocks of sheep for the night. All the sheep would be herded into one sheep pen, all together. They would be safe for the night and the shepherd would get a good night's rest, knowing the gatekeeper was keeping watch.

In the morning the shepherd would come and the gatekeeper would open the gate for him and he would give his special, particular call and his sheep would move out of the pen and follow him. If there were several shepherds at once, the sheep would all only follow their own shepherd.

But another thing I just learned about shepherds is in regard to the 23rd Psalm where David writes “You anoint my head with oil ...” (verse 5).

Did you know that the shepherd gives every one of his sheep their own name? And that in the evening the shepherd will gather his flock and herd them into a pen where he will take the time to go to each sheep, calling them by name, going through their woolly fleece, picking off the burrs and debris that has clung to them through the day. Then when he is finished, he will pour oil on any wounds so they will be comfortable and have the opportunity to heal.

After the shepherd has taken loving care of each sheep, he will lay himself down across the opening of the pen and sleep there for the night. He literally becomes the gate and the sheep will not cross over him.

Another thing I learned about the shepherd is about the rod and the staff that David talks about. “Your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” (verse 4)

The staff has that hook on the end and the shepherd uses it to reach down and pull the lamb up out of the bushes or up from the crevice she may have fallen into. And the rod, of course, is used to fight off wild animals that could kill the sheep.

But I found out that the rod was also used for something else that sounds kind of harsh. When a sheep has a tendency to keep wandering away, the shepherd will use that rod to break the back leg of the wandering sheep. Then, the shepherd will carefully tend to the broken leg, helping it to heal and all the time it is healing he will carry that sheep up around his shoulders. By the time the leg heals the sheep is so used to being close to the shepherd she will not wander away, but will stay very close.

So, when we look again at Jesus’ words to the Pharisees, we can see what he means when he says, “He (the Shepherd) 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.” (verses 3-4)

But then he goes on to say that he is more than the shepherd. He is the gate. He is like the shepherd who lays himself down at the opening of the pen so none of the sheep will get out. He is keeping them safe inside and keeping guard so nothing – no thieves or robbers or wild animals will get inside and do harm. This shepherd becomes the safe gate. It opens when he opens it and because he is trustworthy, the sheep will not be afraid to go out, following him.

So, I was thinking about this gate being Jesus and how we are his sheep. A beautiful metaphor, right? But sheep are frightened easily. The reason the psalmist says the shepherds leads the sheep to still waters is because sheep will be very frightened of running water. They want calm.

They want what they are used to. They can get scared so quickly over almost nothing. Ripples in the water.

Well, maybe the metaphor of us – Jesus’ followers being his sheep – is really a good one. Think about how we are. Don’t we just love to stay inside the walls of this sheep pen called the church? Don’t we prefer things to stay calm and quiet, no ripples happening in our presence? We would usually prefer staying in here with the people who are like us, those we are familiar with, than to go outside and seek out others who might not be like us.

If we aren’t careful, we could be creating change – something that can be frightening, even if it is a small change. We love our comfort.

But here’s the thing – if Jesus is our shepherd – the one who takes care of us, the one who disciplines for our own safety and good, the one who seeks us when we get lost, the one who fights off the bully – who has fought the bully called death – that bully who has chased us all our lives now has no power over us.

How did he tame that bully? By giving his life on the cross. By rising from the dead and giving us the promise of resurrection as well. We sing “O death, where is thy sting?” Death has no power over us. Death, the bully has been destroyed. The shepherd prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. And death is one of them. But now, because the shepherd is in control, the enemies have to be silent. No more do they have power. All the power is in the Chief Shepherd; the Good Shepherd, Jesus.

And if Jesus is this trustworthy, we can be sure that we will be safe and cared for; that we will be not herded out with him behind us, but that he will lead us. We will follow behind, knowing he will never lead us to places where we shouldn’t go.

When I was growing up my neighbor and friend, Janice, lived on a farm. We owned a cattle ranch – cows and horses were all we had. When those cows would get out of the pasture, my stepdad would call all of us to go out and get behind the cattle and herd them back. They were so stubborn. Just about the time we thought they were going in, they would turn and run the other way. My dad would start cursing at them. This is how he cursed. “That dadgum, no good outfit!”

My mom’s name was Barbara. When my dad would get mad because the cow went the other way from where mom was trying herd it in, dad would yell “Barb!” Mom would say, stop yelling at me, and he would say he was yelling at the cow. Mom would then say “I didn’t know the cow’s name was Barb.”

The difference I saw between our cows and my friend, Janice’s sheep was that when I would go down to help her and her brothers move the sheep from the pasture, across the road and into their pen for the night, we didn’t have to get behind them. We would call them and they would start to move toward us. And then we would walk towards the barn and they would follow. It didn’t take long to get them moved to the pen, unlike the cattle who did everything they could to stay out of their pen.

Jesus didn't say he was the cowboy and we are the cows. No. We are the sheep who follow the shepherd because he calls each one of us by our name – the name he gave us. He knows us, he anoints us with healing oil. He lays himself down for our sake and is the gate, keeping out the bullies. Wherever he leads us, we can trust it will be alright, even if there are scary moments.

Do not be afraid, little lambs. Jesus, our good shepherd is leading us in and out. He brings us into the safety of the sheep pen when it is time but he wants to lead us out, as well, to new pastures, new experiences – even if it might mean change.

As those who follow and trust this good shepherd, Jesus, we must hear his voice and follow; we must care about those who are outside of the pen, but who are his as well. We, the Church, must be willing to go out and find those who are longing to know this trustworthy, compassionate, protective shepherd – Jesus, our risen Savior.

Hear the shepherds voice? It is calling you by name. Calling us as a flock to move – to follow and to go out. He will bring us back safely. We can count on that.