



"Beyond the Fold"
Scripture – John 10:1-10
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, August 8, 2021

"I AM" Sermon Series:

If four artists were to paint the same model, they would create four unique portraits. Their works would differ based on perspective, personal style, or simply the play of the light. In the same way, the four Gospel writers create four unique portraits of Jesus the Messiah. One way John paints his portrait is through metaphor — comparing Christ to images that would be familiar to the Gospel's original audience: bread, light, shepherd, vine. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus likens himself to various objects and concepts through statements that always begin the same way: "I am ...". During Dr. Jones' sabbatical, the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson — along with the Rev. Jill Getty and the Rev. Dr. Tracy Keenan — will explore the seven "I AM" statements of John's Gospel and the ways they contribute to a unique portrait of the Messiah who dwells among us.

"Beyond the Fold," which focuses on the statement, "I am the Gate for the Sheep," is the third sermon in the series.

The more we get together, together, together, the more we get together the happier we'll be.

As the commercial begins, athletes join in this familiar song as they charge toward the soccer goal or bump up against each other in an aggressive game of Wheelchair Basketball. The lyrics don't quite match the images of competition ... until we see a little girl share her Oreos with a player on the other team. The final image affirms: "Play brings the world together." But the message of the commercial is clear: *Oreos* bring the world together. This is just one of the ads that's been running on repeat, in between coverage of the men's 100 meter backstroke and the women's balance beam. I've been watching a lot of Olympic events over the past two weeks, so I've seen a lot of commercials. And I've heard a lot of voices telling me what I need to be happy: Like the voice that promises I'll re-connect with both family and nature if only I drive my Lexus deep into the wilderness, where cell phones lose signal. "Go further ... and feel what it's like to *truly* connect." Or the voice that intones, "... love, love, love, love is all we need," against a backdrop of beautiful, carefree, twenty-somethings drinking White Claw. Apparently, I'll find love, love, love if only I drink hard seltzer.

I usually manage to avoid commercials, so I'd forgotten about the constant onslaught of empty promises we receive from the advertising world: "You'll find contentment, connection, community *if only* you buy the right cookie or car or beverage. It's that simple!" they tell us. Of course, the ads only echo the messages we hear on a daily basis ... in our workplaces or schools, on our Facebook feeds, in our own families, even in our heads. "If only," the voices say. "If only you worked harder, or had more money, or lost some weight ... If only you changed this one thing about your life or your self, *then* you'd be content." We are surrounded by voices that promise satisfaction, fulfillment, voices that point to a path that will make us thrive. To hear them tell it, it's as if our very salvation lies in one more purchase, one more diet. But our hearts know: those voices are not the ones that lead us to life abundant. How different these messages are from the one we hear in today's passage from John: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

Now, I am a child of the suburbs; I have *not* spent much time around sheep or sheep-pens. In fact, when I was growing up, my only insight into the role of a shepherd was my family's Shetland Sheepdog. Nessie would herd my friends and me around the yard as if we were lambs and would bark or, even, nip at those who dared invade her "sheepfold." So the pastoral imagery that would have been so familiar to the first hearers of John's Gospel was, somewhat, lost on me. I admit I had to do a bit of research into the practice of sheep-tending to understand the metaphor Jesus uses when he says, "I am the gate for the sheep." He is referring, of course, to the gate of the sheepfold. This is the pen that provides shelter for the flock; a shepherd will herd the sheep into the fold at night, when predators roam freely, or whenever an unforeseen danger threatens the flock's wellbeing.

There is a scene in the novel I mentioned last week, when a violent storm rolls in across the prairie.¹ As soon as the farmer hears the crack of thunder, he rushes to gather his flock into the pen so they can weather the storm in safety. The sheepfold is the place of protection, of rest. But it is *not* the place of provision. During the day, a shepherd will lead the flock out of the pen and into the pasture, where the sheep can graze until they are satisfied. The pasture is a place of plenty, where life is nourished and sustained. The pasture is a site of abundance. The gate, then, is the transition between the pen and the pasture — the way in to safety, the way out to sustenance. At the shepherd's call, the sheep pass through the gate in the morning and, again, in the evening; it is a rhythm of life that ensures both protection and provision. But it is a rhythm the sheep do not keep up on their own. They come in and go out when they hear the shepherd's call, when the shepherd opens the way.

On this point today's passage is a tad confusing. Jesus introduces a whole cast of characters and employs a variety of images. There is a thief, a bandit, a gatekeeper, a shepherd. Yet, Jesus does not claim any of these roles; not *here*, at least. Instead, he is the gate. He is the gate that leads both to protection and provision. But we also know that the one who says, "I am the gate for the sheep," is the same one who calls the sheep by name. Jesus is the one who leads the sheep in and out of the pen, from shelter to sustenance. He is the one whose voice they recognize. "The sheep follow him because they know his voice," Jesus says. The sheep know his voice. And he knows the sheep; Jesus calls them each by name. The shepherd in this passage cares deeply for the flock whom he has gathered into his care, and the flock trusts the shepherd completely. This relationship makes all the difference; the bond between shepherd and sheep is critical for the flock to flourish. Others come to beguile the sheep. Bandits and thieves jump the fence and sneak into the sheepfold; they try to lead the flock astray. But the sheep do not know the strangers' voices, so they refuse to follow.

Jesus, alone, can lead the flock in and out of the pen, from shelter to sustenance. At Christ's call, they have entered the sheep pen through the gate he provides. At Christ's call, they have found welcome in the flock and fold. Yes, the sheep know well the voice of Jesus, for he is the one who beckoned them into a community of care,

¹ Olivia Hawker, *One for the Blackbird, One for the Crow* (Seattle: Lake Union Publishing, 2019).

who invited them to enjoy shelter and belonging and rest. And his is the only voice that will lead them out to pasture. Christ's voice has a different timbre than the voices of false shepherds offering false promises. Bandits and thieves who sneak into the pen do not come to care for the sheep. Their voices are not trusted; the gate they hold open, ignored. The voice of Jesus rings with the truth of his promise; the sheep trust his summons to fields beyond the fold. At Christ's call, they pass through the gate into pasturelands where they will find everything they need to nourish and sustain life, places of plenty where they can eat their fill and be satisfied. In short, they pass into a world of abundance. "I am the gate," Jesus says. "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." It is the voice of Christ that leads to life. Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, we witness Jesus calling his own by name. There is Lazarus — the brother of Mary and Martha who falls ill and dies while Jesus is away. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. But that doesn't keep Jesus from calling out to his friend. "Lazarus," he shouts, "come out!" And the dead man rises and walks from the grave. And there is Mary Magdalene. In the Gospel of John the Resurrected Lord appears first to Mary as she weeps beside the tomb. "Woman, why are you weeping?," he asks. But she mistakes him for the gardener. "Tell me where you have laid him," she cries. But, then, Jesus calls her by name. "Mary!" And she recognizes him and runs to tell the others: "I have seen the Lord!"

"He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ... and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." When Jesus calls Lazarus, he ushers him into life-beyond-death; when Jesus calls Mary, he ushers her into the promise of life-beyond-death. Upon hearing his voice, both follow Jesus into the fields beyond the fold, where they find everything needed to nourish and sustain life. They pass through the gate into a world that offers more than simple sustenance, more than the security of safe space. From valleys of death and despair, they follow the voice they trust into a place of fulfillment beyond what they could have imagined. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," Jesus says. And he shows us what this abundance looks like. It looks like rich pastures beyond the pen, where sheep safely graze until they are satisfied. Where the flock finds the green grass it needs to flourish. Such pasture is there for us; we need only heed the voice that is full of promise; we need only step through the gate that leads to life.

Let me tell you a story, about one who heard the voice of the shepherd, who followed Jesus into the fields beyond the fold and found life abundant: James – as we'll call him – was a member of Wayne Presbyterian, where I served prior to coming to Westminster. When I met James, he'd been worshipping at Wayne for some time. He'd found welcome in the flock and fold. But, for many of those years, he'd not ventured beyond the sheep pen into the pasture and the promise it held. But, as James neared retirement and prepared to leave a successful career, he decided he needed to move toward something else. Christ's voice began to beckon him. So he sat down with the pastors at Wayne to see where he might be able to use his gifts. They steered him towards a ministry in Southwest Philadelphia that needed help with computers and could use his technical expertise. It seemed like a good project – something to fill his days. But, it quickly became more than a project. It was the community that did it – the people at this ministry embraced James, and shared with him their love for God, and for their neighborhood. He wanted to be part of that. He began to get connected to more and more ministries in Southwest Philadelphia – getting to know men at the homeless shelter, and teachers at the schools. When we founded an after school program, James was the first to volunteer – coming three days a week to tutor children. As the school year unfolded, it quickly became apparent how much students in the after school program loved Mr. James. They would wait at their tables, watching for him to arrive. And when he arrived, they'd run up and greet him with a hug and pull him over to their seats so he could help them with their homework.

Follow me, Jesus says, into this world, where we find fulfillment in a child's toothless grin, brighter now that she's conquered that pesky math problem. Follow me into the pasture where provision comes in the eager tug at your hand, from the child who's finished his reading and is ready to play. Follow me beyond the fold, where we all flourish

in the shepherd's care – whether you're a businessman with a successful career behind you, or a child yearning for a brighter future. Follow me, Jesus says. I am the gate that leads to life.

A year after we founded the after school program, I learned that James would be moving away. He'd had serious health problems that would improve in a warmer, dryer climate. And, though he agonized over this decision for months, it was for the best. When he came to my office to tell me the news, his eyes were filled with tears: "This has been the best year of my life. I don't know how I'm going to leave." And, as we talked, I assured him: "I trust that there is a life just as full as the one you have found here. I trust that ... God has something in store for you." And I did trust this. I do trust this. Because Christ came that we may have life, and have it abundantly. Jesus still calls with a voice that is full of promise, saying "Follow me, follow me." This invitation is for all the sheep of his fold, everyone whom he calls by name — for Lazarus, for Mary, for James, for you and for me. Christ still beckons, leading us through the gate into the fields beyond the fold, leading us into a world of abundance.

Prayers of the People – David Robertson

Gracious and Loving God, there are many times during our faith journeys when we have to pause and search for signs that we are on the right path. When we encounter confusing issues laced with clouds of doubt and uncertainty, drive them away with the strong winds of confidence and unwavering purpose. When we face issues loaded with moral ambiguity that would tempt us to wander off the straight-and-narrow and pursue some primrose path, speak the clarion call of conscience and enable us to do the right thing. When others belittle our belief and mock our spiritual experience, give us the courage to stand firm and make us eloquent witnesses for a vigorous, vital, and vibrant faith.

As a religious work-in-progress, we have much to be grateful for. Let's start with the "cloud of witnesses" that have already made the pilgrimage and have arrived in the heavenly city to blaring trumpets and a rousing "well done!" We give thanks for mentors, who offered words of encouragement and guidance. We give thanks for those who led by example, living superb lives of dedication and service. We also give thanks to those who lift up words of scripture and make them relevant for us right here; right now. We are grateful for random acts of kindness – opening a door, holding the elevator, saying "bless you" when someone sneezes, giving up your seat on the bus or train, catching that high pop-foul without a glove and giving the ball to the youngster seated next to you. We are grateful for those who tenderly care for victims of COVID-19; for those sworn to protect and serve; for brave soldiers who place themselves in harm's way to safeguard our cherished freedoms.

Even as we bask in the afterglow of gratitude, there is much in our world that concerns and troubles us. Look kindly upon those who are confused, bewildered, disillusioned, puzzled, and perplexed. Help them sort things through and piece things together. Grant them clarity and courage. Watch over those who are in need—the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the unemployed. May food, shelter, healing, and a good job be just around the corner.

Gather all of our prayers-spoken, whispered, and silent into your everlasting arms. Equip us with an awesome faith so that we can affirmatively respond to the signs of our time. All of this we ask in the blessed name of Jesus our Savior, who entrusted us with keys to the kingdom and taught us to pray when we say together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.