

Wall Street United Church

John 10:1-10

"Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

In our dog's world, I am the gate. Multiple times a day I stand at the door and hold it open saying "In or out...make your choice, because I will not stand here forever heating the whole neighborhood or freezing my fingers off!! Make up your mind!" Eventually, he does.

Now I would never elevate myself to the immense importance of our example from John's gospel. However, Jesus is saying something similar, and with a sentiment that echoes my mundane example of me and our dog. During his ministry, Jesus made seven "I Am" statements, and today I would like to look at "*I am the gate*" from the gospel of John Chapter 10.

What have become known as the "I Ams" are astonishing claims, and we must take them seriously, because the phrase 'I Am' echoes the name that God revealed to Moses in Exodus Chapter 3, where God said: 'I Am who I Am.'

What's interesting about this, is that in the previous chapter of John, we were told the story of the blind man, whose sight was restored by Jesus with a little mud and spit. If you recall, this miracle caused such a commotion in the community that the blind man was brought before the Pharisees. Instead of being amazed and rejoicing at this wonderful miracle, these Pharisees grumbled that the healing had been done on the Sabbath, which 'proved' to them that Jesus could not possibly be from God.

And then the healed man was brought before the Sanhedrin (the leaders of the Pharisees) and renounced as a sinner. He was thrown out of the synagogue and made an example of before the crowds — just because he believed in Jesus' power to heal! The behavior of the Pharisees showed that they were, in fact, claiming to be the gatekeepers of God.

In John 10:10, Jesus addresses these Pharisees.

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.”

Jesus was speaking to them about the true gate and the true shepherd. Who is the one through whom we can gain access to God?

The Pharisees didn't have a clue what Jesus was telling them, so Jesus had to spell it out to them.

He said, ***I am the gate.*** And not just any old gate; he is the only gate, or door for the sheep to enter into the fold. Middle Eastern sheep pens were made from one uninterrupted wall, with a single opening. There is no other entrance to the sheep pen. He is the only gateway for the people.

So why did Jesus use the image of a gate?

Simple....a gate lets people in and out! Everyone knows what a gate is for.

The Bible often uses a flock of sheep to represent God's people. We are Jesus' flock and the people of his pasture. The sheep pen, the safe haven is (hopefully!) the church. However, time and again, we've turned away from God, and from the safety of the fold. We have given God up — gladly and cheaply for things that the world has to offer, and for things that ultimately don't satisfy or matter one wee bit.

At the worst of Covid19, many of our idols were exposed. Many people questioned the validity and importance of what they had valued in their lives. Many questioned the wisdom of placing their security only in their job and income. The big question to ask is: *Have we loved the world more than God? And the answer, 'Of course, we have!!!'*

As Adam and Eve were made outcasts of Eden, we too have been outcasts — outside the fold because of our sin. We have created a barrier (call it sin) between ourselves and God, often made by our own hearts and minds.

Jesus is the shepherd who calls us to the gate. He calls us, his sheep, by name, and we hear his name and respond to him — because, like sheep, we recognize the shepherd's voice. When we hear the word of God, we hear Jesus calling to us in these passages.

God's judgment against Egypt culminated in the Passover. Every member of a family would be struck down, unless the door frame of their home was painted with the blood of a sacrificial lamb, and they were safely inside.

At the gate of the sheep pen, we see the blood of the Crucifixion over the gate, and this allows us to enter in. That is our salvation and God's gift of grace.

Good Friday is called 'good' because it achieved life. We *gain* life when we are invited to go through the gate, as we are invited to live life abundantly in Jesus Christ.

Entering through the gate requires humility, and sometimes a little bravery and a willingness to accept the gift as it is offered to us. As a people of faith, I hope that we have learned that there is no Easter, no resurrection without the Crucifixion — the gift of grace that came at an awful price. And that price must be what makes us humble because we didn't have to do it — Jesus did it for us. Once and for all.

"I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved". We then become Resurrection people, as Pastor Kim referenced in her message last week.

However, a gate doesn't just let you in, it keeps you out as well. I have encountered any number of gatekeepers in our churches and throughout the secular world. Those are the folks who feel they have the authority to keep us out, rather than inviting us in. Those limitations are hurtful and certainly not in the spirit of God's gift of grace. The Pharisees would claim it their right to be in the sheep pen because they followed all the rules, they were righteous, they did good works and went to church, so they didn't really need the sacrifice of Jesus. And what about the rest of us, who maybe aren't quite so righteous, who break the rules, or don't always get to church?

No gatekeepers required! Jesus opens the gate to all of us. That is the great gift of grace. I believe we all need Jesus, or we will find ourselves stuck, once again, outside the safety of the fold.

Hear the voice of the shepherd - *'I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.'*

So, in or out – your choice.

Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me. May we always hear and heed the voice of the shepherd inviting us to abundant life. Amen.