

Sheep Gate Hospitality

A Sermon Preached by
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10

In many congregations, this fourth Sunday in Eastertide is known as “Good Shepherd” Sunday, and we always get some part of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John about good shepherding. And, of course, it is always paired with the twenty-third Psalm, which we will incorporate into our prayers today.

Some years we focus on Jesus as the sheep gate, other times as the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep rather than the hired hand who runs away when the flock is endangered. But I’m always happy to see the passage about the sheep gate rolling around, because it gives me another chance relive my encounter with a sheep gate.

Several years ago, my husband Derek and I spent three weeks in New Zealand, visiting his cousins and walking the Routeburn Track. We spent the first week sightseeing and driving the length of the North Island, and on this particular day, we had been on the road since early morning, when we had parted company with the cousins from Ireland who had been our traveling companions for a week. We had turned down their offer to go with them to the Ancient Kauri Forest Museum, and headed south on our own in order to make it to Rotorua by nightfall. It had rained all morning, the driving was hard, we were tired and needed a break, when through the bucketing rain we saw the sign that said “Sheepworld.” Now you need to know that I’m a really good tourist, especially when it comes to unexpected stops at roadside attractions. What made it even more appealing was that the sign also included the words “coffee” and “gift shop.”

We pulled into the parking lot and ran through the rain to the main entrance, just in time for the sheep-shearing and herding demonstrations. We hadn’t planned on staying, but when our host Craig – the Crocodile Dundee of the sheep world – said that if we wanted a chance to bottle-feed a lamb, to be sure to sit in the front row, I put my money down. I knew we had made a far better choice than the Ancient Kauri Forest Museum.

So there I was in the front row, when Craig asked for a volunteer to demonstrate how sheep are herded through sheep gates. My hand flew up, and I barely edged out my only competition – an eleven-year-old boy from Amsterdam – only because this particular task apparently required an adult volunteer. I realized later that it probably had far less to do with my ability or skill, and more

to do with the fact that it's easier to laugh at an adult than a child – and believe me, there was a lot of laughter.

Anyway, my job was to sort the sheep, by moving the gates back and forth, and sending the sheep with blue chalk marks on their heads to the left, the ones with pink chalk marks on their heads to the right, and the ones with no chalk marks straight down the middle.

I mistakenly thought I was ready when the sheep just came barreling down the chute, all of them pushing to get through the gate at once. What Craig hadn't told me was that I would probably have to smack more than a few of them in the head with the gates, and since I was reluctant to do that, you can guess what happened. One or two made it into the right chute, all the rest of them went straight down the middle. Not one of them paid any attention when I said things like, "No, no! You go right! Wait! Not that way!" The second time around (yes, I had to do it again), I did a little better – a few more sheep got sorted correctly, after some further instruction from Craig, and my renewed determination to move the gates faster and not worry so much about clocking them in the head. It was one of those moments when people kindly say to you, "Don't give up your day job."

Now every time I read this Gospel passage from John, I think about those sheep gates. When Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep," I think of how often God must have to reluctantly smack us in the head to get our attention or move us in a different direction.

We don't have any problem with the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd; in fact, it's one of our most enduring and endearing images of God. Many of us grew up with the painting of Jesus carrying the lost lamb on his shoulders, hanging on the wall in the Sunday School wing, an image that provided a sense of comfort and security for children everywhere.

Today's Psalm, the beloved and familiar words that remind us of green pastures and still waters and the Lord as our shepherd, continues to be one of the most memorized and quoted passages of scripture. We all love it. But as one pastor writes: "I don't mind calling the Lord my Shepherd, but I've never been too flattered by being called one of his sheep. I had hoped to be the eagle of the Lord, or maybe the cunning tiger. Sheep aren't particularly smart. They scare easily, and have a knack for getting lost. Most of us don't look lost. We haven't fallen through society's cracks into homelessness and poverty. . . . most of us can make it to the green pastures on our own." But then he remembers and adds, "Of course, they are never quite green enough, but that only makes us work harder to be our own saviors. And more terrified that we will never pull it off."¹

Even if we have a more generous or even sentimental view of sheep, it's not the way we would like to think about ourselves. Pastor and writer Margaret Guenther reminds us that, ". . . to be a good sheep is not part of the American

¹ Craig Barnes, "Sheep on the run," *Christian Century*, February 13-20, 2002, p. 17.

dream. . . Our society places a high value on ingenuity, creativity and individuality. There is no such thing as an independent or self-made sheep.”²

And really, shepherding, for most of us, is a foreign concept. Shepherding was a dangerous job, and a hard life, since shepherds faced all of the hardships of the hostile landscape through which they herded their sheep. One person has written, “Personally, when I hear the word ‘shepherd,’ the image that comes to mind immediately is what the children look like when dressed as shepherds in the Christmas pageant – well-scrubbed and adorable figures with dish-towels on their heads and clad in striped bathrobes who often need a fair amount of shepherding themselves to get on and off stage at the right points. In other words, the picture that comes to my mind doesn’t have a whole lot to do with what Jesus is talking about here.”³

The image of Jesus as the gate makes more sense when you think about it this way: in the ancient world, the sheepfold, or the place where the sheep were kept, was simply an enclosure of stone walls, with a small entrance where the sheep could be brought in and out. It was probably just wide enough for one sheep to pass through, because at night the shepherd would lie down across the opening to keep predators out or to keep any of the sheep from escaping, thus becoming a human gate to protect the sheep. Sometimes dried nettles would be put on top of the walls, so that if a wild animal tried to climb the rocks, the nettles would rattle and make enough noise to waken the shepherd, who probably wasn’t sleeping all that soundly anyway.

So accepting Jesus as the gate, the one true Messiah, perhaps offers another layer of security and safety for those who come through the gate into the sheepfold of salvation. That’s the good news. When Jesus said there will be one flock and one shepherd, he wasn’t asking for applications. The position has already been filled. And as hard as it can be at times to follow Jesus as the one true shepherd, it’s better than being prey for the other thieves and bandits who will try to take that position in our lives. As one commentary writer noted, “If Jesus is not Lord, then there are countless others who will try to take that position in your life: bosses, politicians, parents; acquisitions, ambitions, causes, always just one more favor to do, one more promotion to get, one more enemy to defeat, before you can rest secure . . . and those other would-be masters are bad news, keeping us penned (up) with anxiety and work toward things which never turn out to be quite what was promised – international, personal or job ‘security’ which really mean a lifetime of vigilance while trying to deny or hide vulnerabilities that are still very real.”⁴

Being in the sheepfold means that we are known by the shepherd, that we are called by name; and that, as Margaret Guenther says, can be both painful and profoundly comforting, because most of us want to be known on our own terms, the carefully constructed and edited version of who we are. We are not so

² Margaret Guenther, “Known by the shepherd,” *Christian Century*, April 26, 1995, p. 453.

³ www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/04/fourthSunday

⁴ Ibid.

anxious to be known for our vulnerabilities or our shortcomings, for our stubbornness or our fears or our lack of faith.

Trusting the good shepherd means that Jesus leads us to what we need. Trusting him frees us to enjoy all of those good gifts, life abundant - whatever that may be, and it is usually far beyond anything we can imagine or want, and it is abundance that no thief or bandit can take away.

The other side of that equation is that when we give the task of shepherd and gatekeeper to God, we give up control over who enters the fold. And here's where we begin to learn about sheep gate hospitality. Let's think of the church as the sheepfold. That's not exactly where John was going with this, but the image works here. Once we're inside, it's pretty comfortable. We look around and see people we know, we see people who are very much like us. We're not especially motivated to make room for more sheep. In fact, it's just comfortably crowded inside those stone walls and more of us would almost certainly mean things would have to change.

One of the things that always happens during an interim ministry is that while we're taking a good long look at ourselves, we're also taking a very close look at the community around us. We want to find out who our neighbors are, and we may find out that they're not very much like us. We may learn that if we are serious about expanding our ministry, we will need to think about welcoming and inviting people into this faith community in very different ways. We may learn that while opening the doors a little wider comes with a certain amount of risk, it also comes with new opportunities for mission, unexpected energy and diversity, and a different sense of who and what God is calling us to be and do.

This past week I shared an article that I found online with the staff at our weekly meeting. In it, the writer says, "I was raised with the understanding that the church building was a dwelling place for God – and that part of its holiness was its ability to welcome all people. Part of what makes us holy as a people of God is our ability to see things in others that the world tends to miss, to see the value that is hidden."⁵

The good news on that side of the gate is that there's no need for us to try to do God's job. That means we don't have to worry about making sure the gates are opened and closed faster or with more efficiency; we don't have to worry about smacking the sheep in the head or one of them getting sorted into the wrong pen. Our anxieties about whether the "wrong" sort of people are getting in are replaced by the freedom to love whomever we find ourselves with in the flock. It is, admittedly, a curious kind of freedom, but then human beings are a rather curious flock.

And it is a freedom that allows us to confidently and obediently follow the shepherd out of the sheepfold and into the world to experience the moment-by-moment presence of God and the grace of being part of the beloved flock. It allows us to have life, and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁵ Bromleigh McCleneghan, "Rummaging," www.theolog.com