

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

July 24, 2022

John 10:1–10

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

This week we begin a sermon series looking at the various “I am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Just as we explored different names and metaphors for God over the previous several weeks, the various “I am” statements are a way of God, through Jesus, revealing an aspect of God’s self to us. God desires to come to us so that we may know God. God seeks to be with us. God wants to be known.

In the Old Testament, it was God who was present in the burning bush when God spoke to Moses. God was with the people of Israel as they wandered in the desert in the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, so that God’s presence was always there. God spoke through the prophets so that the people would hear God’s message. To be known even more, eventually God stopped using spokespeople, and instead showed up directly in the form of Jesus.

On several occasions in the Gospel of John, Jesus makes self-revealing statements that begin “I am.” They are reminiscent of the Old Testament story of God appearing in the burning bush to Moses, when Moses asks the name of God and God replies with, “I am who I am.” Jesus declares, “I am,” and then he uses earthly metaphors to more fully describe himself. Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life,” “I am the Light of the

World,” “I am the Vine,” “I am the Good Shepherd,” “I am the Gate of the sheep,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” and, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

At the same time that Jesus talks about what he is in these terms, he does so in relationship to their opposite as well. Bread instead of hunger, light instead of darkness, the good shepherd instead of a hired hand. Jesus, in these metaphors in some way answers a need that we have, a need that is met in our relationship with him.

The “I am” statements also highlight that relationship that we have with Jesus, and they say something about us. Jesus says, I am the light of the world, but we are also told in other scripture that we are the light of the world. Jesus says, “I am the Bread of life,” and then we are told that if we love Jesus that we should feed his sheep. Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” and the disciples of Jesus are known as people of the way. Jesus says, “I am the vine,” and we are the branches that are to bear fruit. What Jesus’s “I am” statements claim about him, ultimately, they claim about us as well.

Philip Newell, the former leader of the community in Iona, Scotland has said “We are not made by God, but we are made out of God.” Think about that for a moment, but in the first person, in an I statement. “I am not made by God; I am made out of God.”

The declaration of “I am” tells us a lot about God, and about Jesus, and about us. Let us now turn to our first “I am” statement of Jesus. The reading comes from the 10th chapter of John, verse 1 through 10. Listen for the world of God.

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

So again, Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

A number of years ago, I had a conversation with a friend that has stuck with me. My friend was not then and is not now an active churchgoer, and I am pretty sure he wouldn't call himself religious, and he may or may not consider himself to be Christian. Like many, he would most likely fall into that category that is known as, “spiritual but not religious.” He is an intelligent and thoughtful person, and the conversation was wide-ranging and compelling, asking deep theological questions about meaning and God. At one point in the conversation, he asked me, “As someone who is more progressive, or more open, what do you think of those Christians that make statements that are hateful or close-minded? Does it just drive you crazy?”

My simple and short reply was “Yes. Yes, it does drive me crazy.” We talked about this at greater length. I told him it is maddening to think that so many people, people who were once a part of a church community, or maybe more particularly, those that have never been a part of a church community think that the hateful and exclusionary statements that people hear on television and radio from Christians

represent the faith for the majority of those that follow Jesus. I know that it is this perception of the church as hypocritical, hateful, or homophobic that has driven many out of the church or led them never to consider what it might mean to follow Jesus. I think it does a disservice to the faith and to the one we follow. It is, I think, important that we counteract this message and that we share the gospel that is truly good news, a message of God's extravagant and wide-ranging love available to all.

When planning this sermon series and looking at the various "I am" statements, the way the schedule worked gave us six weeks, and yet there are seven statements. So, one had to be left out, and I almost left, "I am the gate," sometimes translated as "I am the door" out. It's not frequently preached on because it is right next to Jesus talking about being the Good Shepherd, and, well, frankly, I think most pastors, myself included, think it's easier to preach on the Shepherd image. And, frankly, this "I am" statement about being the gate or door makes me a little nervous. For those two reasons, it is often skipped for the "I am the Good Shepherd" statement, and because it makes me nervous, I decided that perhaps it was best to start with this particular "I am" statement.

The reason I was nervous about this image is because of the way it has been used by many as such an exclusionary image. It seems to reinforce the type of Christianity that my friend was talking about, that negative, exclusionary, not very graceful Christianity. It almost seems that there are those preachers and Christians that take delight in thinking about this image of gate as the thing that leaves people out. There is a sense of glee and fervor believing that the purpose of Jesus is to exclude. You will not achieve salvation unless you go through the narrow gate they proclaim with a smile on their face. The door slamming shut to them. How many times, and in what ways are doors, whether literal or metaphorical, slammed in people's faces?

How is this good news? I wonder why it is that we tend to want to focus on the exclusion? Why would we take delight in thinking that someone would be left out? Shut out?

With that said, however, there is exclusivity to the claim of Jesus. You can't really ignore it because it is there in the scripture. Not exclusionary, but exclusivity. In other words, something unique about all of the "I am" claims of Jesus. Maybe, though, it isn't so much about us, about whether we are in or out, as much as it is about what Jesus claims to be. In all of the "I am" statements it is Jesus that is clarifying who he is, who God is. The reality of the claims of all of the "I am" statements shape our understanding of who Jesus is, and who we are in relationship to Jesus.

And I think there is an exclusive claim there, a unique claim. I don't think we should necessarily shy away from the exclusive claims of Jesus, we can embrace them, because they show a God that bestows grace, forgiveness, and hope. It doesn't mean that we have to belittle others who may have different understandings. To claim our faith does not mean that we have to shut the door to others. I think we can honor others at the same time that we honor the one who says I am the gate.

We have a God that embraces us. Our God is a God that desires to have a relationship with us. We don't have a hands-off God, but rather we have a God that loves us so much that God showed up in a living breathing human that felt the pain that we feel, that felt the joy that we feel, that participates in the community of faith. That is an exclusive claim, Our God says, "Here I am, for you, I am and because I am, you are. You are loved, you are worthy, you are given hope and a future. Nothing will separate you from my love." In fact, when Jesus calls himself the gate, it is an image of protection and care.

When shepherds would watch their flocks in the ancient near east, they would have sheep folds for the sheep at night. The sheep folds were meant to protect the sheep from predators and thieves. These sheep folds were like fences with an opening that the sheep could go in and out of. There was no actual door or gate that closed off the pen. The shepherd would have to stand as a watchman or at night would sleep in the space to ensure the sheep were safe. The image of the gate is not an image of exclusion, but an image of care. The gate is about provision and protection.

And really in the wider context of the gospel of John, and within the story that comes before Jesus's declaration of "I am the gate," you can see this fuller message of inclusion, grace, and salvation. Jesus says, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in" but that is not the end of the sentence, Jesus continues with, "and go out and find pasture." Jesus as the gate not only lets the sheep in and protects them, but the gate also serves as a way out into the pasture." The gate is not only an entrance, but it is also an exit.

The gate leads the sheep into the pastures, the place that is sustaining. The place to be fed and find water. A place where their hunger is met, and their thirst is quenched. Jesus opens the gate to the pasture that the sheep might fully live.

The scene that happens directly before Jesus's announcement of the gate is a healing, a healing of a man born blind. The disciples and Jesus happen upon a blind man, and Jesus, after some discussion, heals the man completely so that he recovers his sight. This leads to further conversation with the religious authorities, and with Jesus teaching not only on actual blindness, but on spiritual blindness as well. It is after this healing, that Jesus then declares that he is the gate.

Jesus heals and restores the blind man so that he has a full life. He is no longer an outcast, he is no longer pushed aside, he is able to be restored, healed and redeemed. He is able to be in community once again. He is able to live a full life. This is indeed what we hear in the Gospel of John, and what we hear in this passage. The passage ends with Jesus declaring, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” This is what Jesus is about – abundant life – grace upon grace.

Abundant life is a consistent theme throughout the Gospel of John. At the beginning of the Gospel, after Jesus has called his disciples, they are invited to a wedding. When the wine at the wedding runs out, Jesus’ first miracle is to change water into wine. And this isn’t just a small amount of wine, but a lot of wine, and high-quality wine. Jesus extends the party in an abundant and extravagant fashion.

Toward the end of John, under the title in one of my bibles, “The Purpose of John’s Gospel,” the reader is told that the reason for the book of John to be written is so that people will believe and that by believing that we may have life.

The most famous piece of the Gospel is from chapter 3, verse 16 (say it with me), “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Certainly, reminiscent of Jesus as the gate and entering into salvation through him. And in the same way, people, without taking the whole context, sometimes take this beautiful expansive text and use it as a way to scare or shame people into the faith, reciting the verse as a weapon instead of an invitation. Using it as a means to exclude and shut out instead of as a way to reveal God’s grace. But verse 17 is equally important and you cannot have verse 16 without 17, which says, - does anyone know? Can you recite it, (I can’t either). Verse 17 says, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in

order that the world might be saved through him.” Maybe we should have signs everywhere with “John 3:17!” Again, Jesus coming into the world is not about our ability to be exclusive and to limit the saving grace of God. The act of Jesus coming into the world was completely because God loved the world! Jesus comes into the world because God wants us to understand what it is to fully live.

Jesus as the gate, offers both a protective quality, and a quality of entering into fullness and joy. There is both the coming in and the going out. Coming in under the care and watch of the shepherd and being sent out into the pasture.

We are given this promise in the great Psalm 23, that describes not wanting for anything, and being led to lie down in green pastures and by still waters. Where our soul is restored and where the table is set before us, and where our cup overflows.

This is what God wants for us, abundant life, where we are protected and fed, where we can be nourished, and we can flourish.

Jesus comes to us to give life, and to invite all into this life. Into an abundant life, a life that isn't just full, but a life that is overflowing. Grace upon grace.

That is what God wants for us, all of us, abundant life not just full, but overflowing with joy, generosity, love, forgiveness, hope.

Amen.