

## *The Way In and Out*

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John 10: 1 – 10

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### I. Shepherd

In this chapter of John, Jesus describes himself as a Good Shepherd. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus accompanies, protects, and leads. The symbol of the shepherd is familiar within the Hebrew scriptures. Many of Israel's leaders tended flocks, including Moses and David. Psalm 23 proclaims "The Lord is my shepherd." The prophets distinguished between good shepherds who care for the people and bad shepherds who neglect them.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus is in conversation with a group of religious leaders. They have just excluded from their community a man born blind who received sight. His transformation was a threat to them because they could not explain it, and because he ceased to be who they thought he was – a dependent beggar, and because he believed in Jesus. His healing happened outside the purview and authority of the religious community.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes a new community characterized by intimacy with God. In other words, this community is more about relationships than rules. For the early Christian community, and for Christian communities today, there is one relationship that is prior to all others. It is this relationship to which the man born blind bore witness.

It is a relationship with the Word made Flesh, Jesus, the "Son of Man," or more inclusively, "the Child of All Humanity."

Many people who have a hard time with the church in general, or with Christian community, are drawn to Jesus anyway.

Once a person at a coffee shop, when learning that I was a minister, told me, "I love Jesus, but I would never go to church."

I heard another person in a New Member Class say, "I'm not exactly sure why I am here, or if church will have anything to do with my journey, but I woke up one day startled to realize, 'O my God, I love Jesus. What am I going to do?'"

## II. Thieves and Bandits

Jesus uses an allegory to address the religious leaders who have just cast out the man with a gift of new sight.

He invites them to imagine a sheepfold, an enclosure for sheep in the midst of a pasture.

In Jesus' day, these would have likely been walls made up of piled stones, high enough to keep sheep from jumping out.

At one part of the enclosure would be an opening with a wooden gate. Stating the obvious, Jesus says that anyone not using the gate is a thief or a bandit.

That is, the only reason you wouldn't go through the gate is if you were up to no good.

And the only reason you would go in through the gate is if you are the shepherd.

And the shepherd only goes in to care for the sheep or to call them out. Meanwhile, Jesus strongly infers, these religious leaders have prioritized regulations over relationships, power over prudence, control over compassion.

They valued their own status as leaders over the life-giving transformation experienced by one of their own flock.

Jesus is critiquing the tendency of religious leaders to base their leadership authority on anything other than the responsibility to care for God's people, including, especially the most vulnerable.

And Jesus is critiquing the tendency of anyone to base their faith on anything other than intimacy with God.

For Christians, a life of faith begins and ends with relationship and a relationship in particular, a relationship with Jesus.

We are, in a sense, "up to no good," when we base our faith in anything else.

Many who were vulnerable in our society before this virus pandemic, have been made yet more vulnerable.

Our society's systemic racism has created the conditions for African Americans to suffer and die from Covid-19 at a much larger rate than any other group.

Our economy's privileged are able to protect themselves from exposure while workers who are living paycheck to paycheck put their whole families at risk simply by going to work.

Our culture's prejudices are causing people with disabilities, transgender people, people with compromised immune systems, and many others to wonder whether they will receive the medical care they need.

In the meantime, some of our business and political leaders, including our president, have placed their own privilege and political fortunes above the health of the country as a whole.

They have, in essence, hopped over the into the sheepfold to take what they need without regard for the well-being of those they have been entrusted to nourish and protect.

### III. Gate

Before Jesus describes "The Good Shepherd," he calls himself "The Gate."

It's worth think a little bit about what this might mean.

A gate is a movable door within a passageway.

A gate is opened to let in or let out, and it is closed to keep in or to keep out.

But Jesus describes himself specifically as the gate of a sheepfold. Imagine it is dusk in the pasture. As night falls, the threat of getting lost or being harmed by a predator increase.

The shepherd leads the sheep through the gate into the safety of the sheepfold.

As the sun begins to rise, the shepherd calls the sheep to leave the fold through the gate so that they might go out and receive nourishment.

As the way in and the way out of the relational community, Jesus is the gate, the means by which members of the community are led to safety by night and nourishment by day.

I've mentioned the path I walk most days along Piner Creek.

This week, I paid attention to the gates that lead from backyards out onto the path.

For those with no gate, the only way to get to the path is to go out the front door and to walk until you find the place where the path meets up with the street.

For those with a gate, there is immediate access to the path, to the beauty of the creek and its creatures.

But it's important to be able to close the gate, if not lock it, especially at night.

Unknown creatures and people might otherwise enter.

The gate regulates access to the path by day and safety of home at night.

A gate must be used wisely and judiciously.

For example, as we emerge from our shelter-in-place, the opening of the gate should be done in a way that continues to care for the vulnerable.

As we open up our lives and begin to co-abide with one another, we need to do it in a way that balances safety and nourishment.

We need to follow the way of the good shepherd who cares for all of the sheep and reject the ways of thieves and bandits who put their own protected well-being above all else.

#### IV. Other Sheep

The thief, Jesus says, “comes only to steal and kill and destroy,” but “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

That is the whole Gospel summed up in a phrase, “to have life, and have it abundantly.”

But who is referred to as “they” in Jesus’ statement?

Isn’t this one of those passages that seeks to exclude anyone who doesn’t believe in Jesus or follow him as their shepherd, or hear his voice?

By no means. After all, isn’t the whole point of describing himself as the gate, and as the good shepherd, to counter the exclusion of the man whose sight was restored?

Furthermore, intimacy with God is not something that can be regulated or controlled, let alone judged from a distance.

And we who are Christian have seen “abundant life” present in the lives of those who do not share our faith.

At the beginning of this pandemic, my Muslim friend Moe was the first person to contact me and let me know he was praying for the well-being of my family and my church community.

In verse 16 of this same chapter, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.”

Let us not revert to being thieves and bandits by trying to rob Jesus of his other sheep, sheep of a different fold, who no less share intimacy with God and enjoy abundance of life.

Salaam. Shalom. Peace. Amen.