

THE GATE AND THE SHEPHERD

JOHN 10:1-10

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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MAY 11, 2014/4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter. Today is also Mother's Day. I know that many churches have Mothers Day sermons, but I will not be preaching a Mothers Day sermon today.

This is *not* because I don't think mothers are important or that Mothers Day is a bad idea or *anything* like that. I am glad to wish all mothers a very Happy Mothers Day and happy to set aside a day to honour them!

But I know that while Mothers Day is time of celebration for many, that for others it can be a source of pain. Those who have lost their mothers, for example. Or those who wish they could be mothers, are not. Or those who have struggled or are struggling with infertility. Or those who have strained relationships with their mothers. Or any of the other ways in which our relationships tend to be more complex than a Hallmark holiday.

The other reason that I will not be preaching a Mothers Day sermon is because I think it is important that in our worship as a church that we allow the Christian calendar and the story of Jesus, not the secular calendar to determine what I preach on. Again, this is not a judgment on churches who do things differently, it's just the way I approach things and, I think, the way we at Lethbridge Mennonite Church has approached this day historically.

Our Worship series over the next 4-5 Sundays will take us through lectionary texts from the gospel of John. The question that I had in mind as I looked at these texts and mapped out the preaching schedule was, "Who is This Jesus?" This is an important question to always be asking ourselves, I think, but especially so during the Easter season.

This week I was at Regent College in Vancouver attending a Pastors Conference, so this sermon has kind of been scratched out on buses and trains and airplanes in between other things this week ☺.

The theme of the week was transformation, and focused on the pursuit of personal holiness amidst the challenging ethical issues of our time. In many ways, we didn't do

anything very unique this week. We read Scripture together; we worshipped, we prayed, we spent time in silence, we listened to lectures and sermons. But it was a very good time. It was good to be called back to some of the simple things that are so crucial to how God forms into the image of his Son.

So today, the sermon is going to follow a pretty simple format. We're just going to walk through our text and see what we can learn from our teacher this morning.

I invite you to follow along in your bibles. We are not going to camp on every verse, but we will pause on many of these ten verses. I think you will see that this is a very rich passage!

Verse One: *"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.*

Who is Jesus talking about here? There were many different groups of people clamouring for the allegiance of Israel at the time.

- Zealots: convinced that armed revolution was the way to be faithful
- Essenes: took the opposite approach, advocated monkish lives of retreat and solitude, having nothing to do with the evils of culture
- Pharisees: law!!
- Sadducees: cozying up to Rome for privilege and influence

I think Jesus may have had any or all of these groups in mind.

But he is speaking particularly to the Pharisees here. Remember what came before this text in John's gospel—the story of Jesus healing a man born blind

We spoke about this a few weeks ago—Jesus was critiquing the Pharisees; he was saying that they, who thought they saw God clearly and could explain and enforce his ways to the people, were blind, and the ones who were blind were the ones who could see truly, for they understood their need for Jesus

Jesus is offering another stern rebuke, again, to the religious leaders who have piled burdens on the backs of the people. They are blind. They are also thieves and robbers.

(Jesus doesn't sugar coat things!)

Down to verse three...

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

There's a lot going on in this verse.

It's interesting to reflect on the nature of gatekeeping. Who is the rightful gatekeeper of the sheep?

How often, throughout the history of the church, have we assumed this role ourselves?

- We think that it is our job to police the boundaries of the church and in so doing, we prevent people from hearing the voice of the shepherd
- Examples are unfortunately endless
 - o The nature of the Lord's supper
 - o The understanding of authority
 - o Matters of sexuality
 - o Gender roles
 - o Worship styles (!)

In this parable, Jesus doesn't tell us who the gatekeeper is—it is him? God the Father?—but one thing is certain. **It isn't the sheep!**

Moving on...

The shepherd calls his sheep by name...

You and I are *known by name!*

It's so easy to let faith drift into some abstract belief system or a program of ethics, to reduce faith to being for the right things and against the wrong things (this is true on both sides of the "conservative/liberal" divide).

I think that we often default to these approaches to faith because they are easier to handle, easier to manage, maybe even less "embarrassing" in a skeptical culture. We shrink from speaking about God in personal terms. Far easier to speak about belief systems and ethics than about the shepherd who knows us by name and has called us his own!

But I am convinced that faith is irreducibly *personal*. We are called *by name* into a relationship with the living Christ. God encounters us as individuals with names and stories.

... and leads them out

The sheep don't stay in the pen! This is important to note; the task of the church has *never* been to huddle inside the pen, protected by their shepherd

It's very easy to do this, isn't it? It's very easy to grow complacent and make the life of the church and the faith all about us and our needs and our security.

What pastures is Jesus calling you to follow him into? What about our church?

Our task is to follow the shepherd *out!* This task of following isn't always easy, but it is always necessary.

In his book, *The Jesus Way*, Eugene Peterson, in a chapter on Abraham following the call of God to a place he didn't know, talks about cultivating "habits of relinquishment" and how "relinquishment is prerequisite to fulfillment."¹

When we follow, we give up autonomy; we forfeit our own autonomy, our own determination to determine the shape of our lives; this is a prerogative that belongs to the shepherd alone.

And so, we follow, giving things up along the way—our inadequate conceptions of what a "good life" looks like, perhaps even some of our desires and dreams, perhaps being well thought of (think of Jon Olmert's reflections on the Beatitudes last week!).

When we follow, we relinquish control to the Shepherd.

Verse Four: *When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.*

He goes ahead of them.

There may not be five more important words in all of Scripture.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus is the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 50.

As followers of Jesus, we cannot go where he is not.

Whatever we face—and many of you have faced many very hard things in this life, and many *will* face hard things—we can have confidence that we do not face them alone; our shepherd goes ahead of us; indeed, our shepherd knows all about them for he has suffered too.

The next verse after our reading today is one of the most well known in John's gospel:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

The sheep follow because they know the shepherd's voice.

I read a number of articles this week that talked about what shepherding really looks like in the Middle East today (some of you may even have seen this); the shepherd really does go out ahead of the sheep and they really *do* recognize his voice amidst all the others.

Do we know the voice of our shepherd?

Have we been paying attention, listening carefully?

This past week at Regent, I was reminded of the crucial importance of some of the most basic spiritual disciplines by which saints down through the ages have trained themselves to hear the voice of their shepherd

- prayer
- worship
- service
- solitude
- Scripture

It's so easy to just forget about these things, to adopt the norms and habits of our culture. I know that it is so easy to just turn on the phone or flip open the laptop first thing in the morning rather than spending some time reminding myself whose I am and what I have been called to.

It's so easy to listen to other voices!

The voices we are prone to following are, in many ways, dependent upon the habits we choose to cultivate.

There are many, many voices out there; our world is *drowning* in voices—

- Voices trying to sell us things
- Voices trying to manipulate us
- Voices trying to convince us to make causes or issues primary that should be secondary at best
- Voices telling us that we are only as useful as what we produce
- Voices telling us that we don't matter, that we are worthless
- Voices telling us that we deserve everything that we want

We can choose to listen to these voices. Many of us do.

Or, we can choose to listen to the rabbi from Galilee who tells us who we are and what we were made for.

Verse Five: *They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.*"

Ah, but we *do* know the voices of strangers, don't we? We just discussed this. We go astray. This theme resounds throughout Scripture.

Isaiah 53:6:

*All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way.*

Ezekiel 34 is an extended discussion of the false shepherds of Israel, who had led the sheep down false paths.

Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

During one of the breaks this week at Regent, I wandered over to the art display that was upstairs. The exhibit was organized around the Stations of the Cross, and was called *Via Crucis: The Way of the Cross* and had 15 pieces of very different kinds of artwork meant to guide the viewer on a journey through Jesus' passion.

One, in particular, caught my eye. It was a piece created by an artist named Dan Law from Tofino, BC. It was a little wooden lamb bent with two black wooden ravens beside it [*see images on the screen*].

Initially, I wasn't quite sure how to interpret it so I read the explanatory notes in the program. It turns out that the artist and his wife used to live on a sheep farm where their job was to ensure that the lambs were born in safety. They would often go out at night during cold and wet conditions to check on the lambs.

One early morning after a particularly vicious storm, he found a little lamb standing all by itself in a field, immobilized by a night of freezing rain and snow. Three ravens stood casually around it. They had been pecking away at this poor little lamb throughout the night. There were little stains of blood on its wool. They were able to save the lamb, but the image stuck with the artist, particularly during the Easter season—this little lamb, all alone, waiting to die.

For me, the image brought to mind the experience of going astray.

We wander off, we refuse to heed the shepherd's voice, and we find ourselves out in the storm, without a guide, battered by the trials of life, facing grave dangers of all kinds because we are so prone to wander, so prone to listening to the voices of strangers.

Verse Seven: *So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.*

Jesus switches up the metaphor here. First he was the shepherd, now he is the gate. Again, based on my reading, in pastoral cultures throughout history, shepherds would often lay themselves across the gate to protect their sheep.

The shepherd would *become* the gate. What a powerful vision.

The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...

Verse Nine: *I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.*

Jesus repeats his statement: He is the gate. We do not come in any other way. We enter only through him.

We come in and go out. We find pasture. Again, our job isn't to stay in the pen.

Verse Ten: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

The shepherd has come for life.

Wherever there is flourishing, wherever there is goodness and truth, wherever there is beauty... These are the pastures that the Shepherd wants to lead us into.

This doesn't mean that Jesus has come that we will have comfortable lives full of material blessings, and absent suffering. Again, a quick glance at the beatitudes ought to be enough to make this clear, but there are so many places in the gospels and throughout the NT that talk about being prepared to take up our cross and follow Jesus into difficult places.

But Jesus has come for life.

I think the church has often been guilty of presenting the life of faith as a joyless exercise of duty, as if the more miserable we were, the more God could tell that we were serious.

We often hear about Jesus' upside down kingdom, but one of our lecturers this week said that we should rather say that Jesus teaches us to see ourselves and the world right-side up.

Jesus teaches us what love and hope look like. Jesus teaches us that we were made for God and for each other, not for ourselves. Jesus teaches us that lives of open-handed generosity and self-sacrifice are the way to freedom. Jesus teaches us that we are not the captains of our own ship.

The other voices only kill and steal and destroy. They never deliver what they promise. They leave us chasing shadows, wracked with guilt over all that we can't accomplish, over all the suffering that we cannot solve.

They leave us out in the blinding rain, with the enemies of our souls pecking away, stealing the life from us.

But the shepherd of our souls has not come for these things. Our shepherd has come for *life*.

So, who is this Jesus?

Simply put, this Jesus is the good shepherd who lies across the gate, who lays down his life for his sheep, who invites his sheep to follow his voice into a life of fullness that they could have never predicted or imagined.

I have come that they may have life...

So, may God help us to be people who listen to the voice of the shepherd, who enter by the gate, who come in and go out into the world, confident that our shepherd has our best in mind, and can be trusted to guide us into pastures of wholeness, peace, and life.

