

Sermon for Sunday, May 7, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today, the fourth Sunday of the Easter Season,
is the Sunday
traditionally called
“Good Shepherd Sunday.”
For the last couple of weeks, our gospel readings
have been visibly connected with Easter,
as we heard about the various appearances of the risen Jesus
to his followers.
Now we’ve jumped back in time,
back before Christ’s death and resurrection,
to the gospel of John’s report
of his long discussion about sheep and shepherds.

I’d always wondered
why the lectionary did this;
it was only yesterday
that I finally realized that it’s Psalm 23
that brings us here.
Because our psalm,
that well known psalm that we so often hear at funerals,
talks about the Lord as our shepherd
who accompanies us through the valley of the shadow of death,
and brings us out the other side
to the feast prepared for us,
and that place where we will be with God
for all time.
In other words,
we are guided through death
and into resurrection life,
and so the Lord as shepherd
is indeed an Easter theme.

That said,
when Jesus begins to talk about shepherds and sheep,
it’s not quite
so clear.

And it all begins
kind of abruptly.

In the chapter before this,
chapter nine
of the gospel according to St John,
which you might remember we read during Lent,
Jesus is in Jerusalem, and he heals a blind man.

And that provokes a discussion

- actually probably more of an argument -
with the religious leaders about what faith is all about,
whether it's about obeying the letter of the law
or doing something good that reflects the spirit of the law,
and how you know if someone or something is from God,
who should be doing what when,
but it's not just words.

The religious leaders
question the blind man
and finally decide
that whatever else has happened,
he's been led astray
and doesn't belong.

And they drive him out.

But Jesus goes and finds him,
and reaffirms
his faith.

And then suddenly
without a word of explanation,
chapter 10 begins
with Jesus talking
about sheep.

Or,
to be more accurate,
he begins talking
about sheepfolds.

That is,
the place where you would put your sheep at night
to keep them safe.

It was typically just four drystone walls,

each of them topped with thorny branches
to keep intruders out,
and a gap that was the door.

Usually

a gatekeeper, who could be a shepherd or a hired hand, would lie across the gap at night,
so that anything or anyone trying to get in
would wake him up.

And of course, the only person who had the right to be let in
would be the shepherd.

And likewise, the gatekeeper wouldn't let any of the sheep out, unless the shepherd was
there, calling to them.

So there Jesus is,
in Jerusalem
talking about sheepfolds.

Farming.

In the middle of a city.

And it's perhaps not surprising
that no one has a clue
what he means.

Until he begins to speak again.

"I am the gate."

Oooohhhh...

And suddenly
it all begins to make sense.

Sort of, anyway.

If Jesus is the gate,
well at least

we know he's not just talking about farming.

He must be using
a metaphor.

But if Jesus is the gate
who is everyone else
in the story?

We're used to leaping straight to the idea
that Jesus is the shepherd.

After all,

that's what he says
later in this same chapter of John.
But he hasn't quite got there yet - plus he can't really be
both the gate and the shepherd.
So let's just stay with this image.

Jesus is the gate.
Now, the people he's talking to
are Jewish.
They know their scriptures, just like us.
And we jump straight
to Psalm 23.
The shepherd
is the Lord,
which in the Old Testament
is a way of referring to God the creator-
it's only after Christ
that we think of him as Lord.
And if God is our shepherd,
then we are sheep.
And then the thieves
are anyone or anything
that offer the sheep
a way to live
that avoids God.
So Jesus is the gate
and the shepherd is God,
and the thieves are anything that is anti-God,
and we are the sheep,
then who
is the gatekeeper?

Who is the one
who chooses to let the shepherd -
and the sheep -
in and out?
And suddenly we have the connection
with the previous chapter.
The religious leaders
have been functioning as gatekeepers.

They have been
deciding
who is in
and who is out.
And they have just driven the healed blind man
out.

So the obvious question is,
who is it
that performs the function of gatekeeper
for us?
Who is it
that controls access
between the sheep - the people of God -
and God?

One answer could be
the clergy.
We all know stories
of people who have come to a parish
or been turned off
by a particular priest.
I've certainly heard stories here
about Mr Mills,
who I gather was a somewhat fierce person.
You either loved him
or were terrified.
But it's not just the clergy.
If you ask people
why they joined a particular church,
especially when it's not the closest one to them,
you will often hear them say,
"I felt really welcome."
Or, if you ask them why they didn't join another church,
"I didn't really feel welcome"
or "I just didn't seem to fit in."

And if you ask them what made them feel welcome or unwelcome,
it's not often the clergy.
It's usually what they experience

from other parishioners.
Because while the clergy may welcome them initially,
one of the biggest reasons people stay
is their experience of other people in the congregation,
not just the first day they show up
but week in, week out.

You see,
we are all
gatekeepers.
We are all the people
who can shape
who makes it into the sheepfold,
who makes it into the community of faith,
we are the people
who make it possible for other people
to follow God.

So how can we be gatekeepers
who welcome people, who invite them to belong?

Obviously one place
is at the physical entry to our church.
Our greeters and ushers
are the first people meet
when they visit our church.
And they do an incredible job
of welcoming people in through our doors,
and inviting them to join us at coffee hour.
Thank you, ushers and greeters!

But that's only one aspect of welcoming.

The next step
is what we do when they get into our service.
Imagine you came to an episcopal church for the first time.
You're given a bulletin when you arrive,
with various things sticking out of it.
Then you get to your pew,
and you're faced with a prayer book and a hymnal as well.

Where do you begin?

That's why we print the whole service in the bulletin,
to make it at least a little easier to juggle.

But what if, instead of complaining that new people don't participate,
we were to intentionally sit with people we don't know,
make sure that they can find where we're up to?

And have you ever noticed

that complaining about the noise small children make, or giving them dirty looks, doesn't
actually do anything positive?

And what if, when someone has small children
we were to ask if we could help out?

It might mean finding a children's bulletin for the kids to work or scribble on.

It might mean building a relationship so the kids get to know you,
and will eventually choose to sit with you.

It might be as simple as giving a harassed parent
a smile.

And at the peace, let's not just shake hands with our friends.

As you look around,
see if there's anyone you don't know.

This doesn't just mean people new to the parish. They might be people who've been here
a while but you've just never really got to know them.

Or kids who have grown into young adults.

If you can't get to them then,
when the service ends,
make a point of meeting them.

Ask their name.

Get to know them a little.

Invite them to coffee hour.

And then outside of the service,
how do we help people feel we belong?

Again, getting to know people's names is a good beginning.

But we need to go beyond that.

Things like inviting them to sit with you at coffee hour helps.

Perhaps ask them if they'd like to join you in a ministry that you do.

Look them up in the directory, and send them a note or give them a call.

If Jesus is the gate

then we are the gatekeepers.

We get to be the ones
who can welcome people into the sheepfold,
into the community of faith.

We
can do it.