

#### **4.26.26 Sermon on John 10:1-10**

When Darick and I were in Bethlehem in 2019, we went up to Beit Sahour, also known as the Shepherd's Field, where tradition holds that this was the location where the angels appeared to the shepherds in the field to proclaim the birth of Jesus. It wasn't like I had always pictured it in my mind, an expansive field of lush green. Instead, it was a hilly area – light on grass, heavy on rocks. So rocky, in fact, that there were caves. We went inside one of those caves, and a guide explained to us that often shepherds actually used these caves as sheep pens. It was a safe and enclosed area where the sheep could be protected at night. And of course, because this was a cave, there was no wooden gate on hinges. There was no lock, no barrier. The guide explained to us that often, the shepherd would lay across the opening to the cave. His own body was the gate, and nothing got in or out except by going through him.

When I heard that for the first time, it opened up this passage to me in a new way. This is the image that Jesus give us when he says, "I am the gate." The gate is not a wall or a weapon, it's a body – a body given.

These words are not spoken in a vacuum, and this isn't Jesus offering a calm, pastoral reflection out in a quiet field somewhere. This is happening in the aftermath of conflict. If you recall, a few weeks ago we were in John 9, the chapter right before this, where Jesus heals a man who was born blind. This miracle should have been a moment of celebration as a man who had been pushed to the margins of society suddenly sees. But instead of joy, it sparks controversy. The religious leaders interrogate the man, they question his parents, and they debate the rules. The man refuses to back down, and when he insists on telling the truth about what Jesus has done, they cast him out. The man is cut off from community, from worship, and from belonging. And it's into that moment that Jesus begins to speak about shepherds and sheep.

As Jesus talks about the gate and the Good Shepherd, he is drawing a sharp contrast between leaders who use their power to exclude and control, and a shepherd who gathers, protects, and lays himself down for the sake of the sheep. He is, in effect, saying, "There are people that will push you out, but there is a shepherd who will come find you."

And so, as Jesus moves into this segment of discourse with his disciples, he contrasts two kinds of leadership: thieves and bandits who climb over the walls, and the shepherd who enters through the gate. Thieves and bandits are ones who would use and exploit the sheep in the flock for their own gain. But the shepherd enters through the gate. Then he shifts the metaphor in a surprising way, because he doesn't just say the shepherd uses the gate. He says, "I am the gate."

And that means this: the safety of the sheep is secured by the presence of the shepherd. It is secured by the shepherd's self-giving love. The shepherd does not stand at a distance; the shepherd places his own body in harm's way. If a wolf is coming to get the sheep, it literally has to go through the shepherd first. But lest we get stuck thinking about this in an abstract way, let's not forget that the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep is deeply personal. The sheep are not just some type of financial opportunity to the shepherd. They are *his* sheep.

Just a few verses earlier, Jesus says, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." This is not a shepherd with a generic flock, where he can't tell the difference between any of the sheep. He calls them out – by name. This means that these words Jesus speaks are not just about how God works in general. This is about how God relates to you. To me. The Good Shepherd is not managing a crowd, he is tending to lives.

In that world, a shepherd knew his sheep. He knew their patterns, their fears, the ones who wandered, the ones who needed extra care. He knew some needed a gentle nudge, that some needed to be carried. And some needed to be called back again and again. And all of the sheep, with all of their idiosyncrasies, belong to the flock. None of them are disqualified from belonging. You and I are not just part of the flock. We are known by the Good Shepherd.

Yesterday during John Barnes' funeral, we did a responsive reading of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and we can hear its resonance in the background of this passage. Listen: "The Lord is my shepherd... He restores my soul... He leads me... He is with me..." This is not distant care, but intimate, attentive, and particular love. This is the kind of love that notices when we are exhausted, or afraid, or wandering. This is the kind of love that stays with us.

I want to go back now to that image of the shepherd as the gate – they body lying across the entrance. That's a vulnerable position. If a predator comes, the shepherd doesn't send the sheep out to fight, or to defend him. He doesn't use them as a decoy for his own self-preservation. He doesn't throw out the weakest sheep as bait to save the rest. The shepherd absorbs the risk himself, with his own body. His body becomes the line between life and death.

When the shepherd makes himself the gate, he absorbs all of the sin and violence upon himself. This is not the logic of the world. It's not the logic of empire. Empire says, protect yourself at all costs – secure your borders and sacrifice the vulnerable if necessary. Meet violence with violence. Peace through strength, right? But Jesus offers a different kind of power: the power of self-giving love; the power of a body laid down across the threshold.

The Good Shepherd goes to great lengths to lay down his life for his sheep for all, but even just for one.

As I was thinking about this passage this week, I thought about people who have embodied the love of the Good Shepherd in some way. A story about Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers came to mind. His gentleness and care, to me, remind me of the care of the Good Shepherd. Once he was asked why he moved so slowly on his show – why everything felt so deliberate, and patient, and gentle. He said it was because he wanted children to feel that they were worth that kind of time. So when he looked into the camera, he wasn't addressing a crowd, he was speaking to one child. Sometimes he would do it by name, if he could. He would take long pauses, and ask simple, honest questions. He would name feelings that children didn't always have words for. In doing this, he created a kind of space where children could come as they were, and they could know that they were safe and they were loved. That doesn't necessarily look like laying down across the mouth of a cave, but its own way, it is. It is a life given, slowly and intentionally so that others might be held, protected, and known.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep. They cannot hide, for good, or ill. I don't know about you, but the idea of being known that well is kind of unsettling, because it means the shepherd sees everything. The places where we feel like we don't measure up, the habits we can't seem to break, the griefs we carry, the spaces of deep shame and doubt that we dare not utter aloud to anyone. The shepherd sees the lost places within us.

And that's where another story echoes in the background – the story of the lost sheep in Luke 15. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one that is missing. Really, that's rather irresponsible of the shepherd, if we think about it – what's one sheep when there are 99 perfectly good ones still there? Is it really worth the risk to go and find the one sheep? But that's exactly the point of the story – the shepherd doesn't operate by conducting a cost-benefit analysis. This shepherd operates on love – love that refuses to write anyone off or to deem them expendable. This shepherd operates on love that crosses boundaries and isn't afraid to go out into the wilderness. It's love that refuses to come back empty-handed. And when the shepherd finds that sheep, he just picks it up, carries it home, and rejoices! When we are that sheep, when we wander or try to hide, those are the places the Good Shepherd is already moving toward.

Jesus tells us, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." That doesn't mean barely surviving, just making it through. It doesn't mean being constantly afraid or locked inside systems of scarcity and fear. He says, "Abundant life." But notice how that life is made possible – abundant life doesn't come through control, or power, or violence. It

doesn't come through hoarding or accumulation of wealth and status. It comes through a shepherd who gives himself.

It's probably not too hard not to see where this is going, because in just a few chapters, this same shepherd will once again place his body at the gate – not of the sheepfold, but of the world. On the cross, Jesus becomes the place where violence stops – where hatred meets love and it does not get returned in kind. It's where the powers of sin and death do their worst, and they are not met with retaliation but with forgiveness. The shepherd does not save the sheep by killing the wolf – he saves the sheep by refusing to become a wolf himself.

So what does this mean for us? If we follow this shepherd, it means we are called into that same kind of life – and that's where it gets uncomfortable. That's where it can become downright scary. It's much easier to build walls than to become a gate. It's also much easier to protect ourselves than to place ourselves between danger and someone else. It's much easier to do a cost-benefit analysis and to just write some things off as losses. But Jesus tells us and shows us what this kind of life looks like. It's not abstract kindness or a sort of distant compassion. It looks like a life of deeply relational, embodied, costly, self-giving love. And this life begins not with us having to prove ourselves, but learning to trust that we are already fully known – already held, already called by name by our Good Shepherd.

Let's go back to that image of that cave again, at night. Imagine – the sheep are inside. They are restless, vulnerable, dependent. At the entrance, the shepherd lies down. He is the last thing between them and the darkness. The sheep sleep because the shepherd does not – they rest because he keeps watch, and they live because he is willing to give himself. And they follow him because they know his voice.

Jesus says: "I am that shepherd." "I am that gate." "I am the one who lays down his life so that you may live." Do we trust him enough to rest? Do we trust him enough to follow? And perhaps most challenging of all, do we trust that he really does know our name and loves us still? Amen.