

Fourth Sunday of Easter (A/RCL)  
John 10.1-10  
April 17, 2005  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Happy Good Gate Sunday! Have you ever heard that before?? Maybe you're more familiar with the name "Good Shepherd Sunday," which falls on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, this weekend. But Jesus' announcement, "I am the good shepherd," isn't included in today's Gospel, which cuts out one verse earlier.

Jesus begins today's Gospel by describing someone crawling over the fence to do harm to the sheep in the fold. He says that in contrast to the sneaky thief,

"The one who enters **by the gate** is the shepherd of the sheep."

Jesus goes on to talk about the shepherd calling the sheep by name and leading them out. They are more than willing to follow because they recognize his voice; if they didn't, they would run in the opposite direction.

St. John says that those who were listening to Jesus didn't have a clue about what He was saying. So instead of retracing the same lines or drawing a bigger picture of a shepherd, He paints a new image. It's probably more puzzling to us than the one He started out with:

"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." (John 10.7-9)

Personally, I like the warm fuzzy of Jesus being the Good Shepherd who lifts this little lamb (me ☺) into His arms and cuddles her continuously and carries her to safety when need be. Somehow Jesus as "the gate" leaves me a little cold, at least initially. How do you warm up to a gate?? It's not that Jesus comparing Himself to an inanimate

object is unheard of.... We're aware of and comfortable with other "I am" sayings, like "I am the bread of life," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the way, the truth and the life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the vine," "I am the Alpha and the Omega." They're familiar and beloved windows we can look through to see who Jesus is. But – "I am the gate"??

Actually, though, in the Palestine of Jesus' time, the shepherd and the gate were sometimes one.... Sometimes there wasn't a wooden gate to close to keep the sheep in the fold or to keep marauders out, so the shepherd lay across the opening and became a **human** gate during the night. No one, nothing, could go in or out except **over** him – over his live body – or over his dead body. Jesus guards us with His very life.... And when the time came He lay down that life for us.

Another take on the image of **Jesus** as **the gate** is the insight, "One enters the fold through Jesus" (*New Interpreter's Bible*, p.669). A door is an **entryway**. Last week I mentioned how the baptismal font is usually tucked in the cut-out of the last pew because that is closest to the outside door through which people come into this house of worship and into this community of faith. At the 11:15 service this weekend, we'll move the font to the front of the sanctuary, so everybody can see a new and precious little lamb, Sophia Louise, brought into the heart of this faith family. Her baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus is her entry into the abundant life of faith. Jesus is her and our **gate** into eternal life as well.

A gate is usually two-way, providing a way to enter **and** to exit. Sheep do not spend most of their **waking** lives in the fold, the enclosed pen. They are often, **usually**, out and about, being led to pasture and happily grazing their way through the day. The

shepherd who protected them through the night so they could rest safely, also leads them out to find food and drink. Jesus, the Shepherd who **is** the Gate who lay down His life for us, is also the One who promises us refreshment. During Lent we heard Him make this pledge to the woman at the well:

“...[T]hose who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4.14)

And to the crowds whom He fed with five barley loaves and two fish He said:

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6.35)

The living water of the Holy Spirit, the bread of life and the cup of salvation are the food and drink our Shepherd Lord offers His flock, **us**.

The difference between sheep and us is that **we** eat and drink **here** in this enclosed space, this safe sanctuary, and then the One through whom we enter leads us out again, so that we may go forth to feed others with Good News, with compassion and with justice. Sheep unknowingly “serve” by giving their wool, a renewable resource, and sometimes by giving their flesh, which is the end of them. We knowingly, consciously, **joyfully** serve by freely sharing the material and spiritual gifts we have received. We are nourished so we can nourish others. We are **called** to be **sent**. Our Shepherd speaks **our** names so that we can call **others** by name to His side.

No shepherd takes care of just one lamb. A shepherd cares for an entire flock. A **lone** lamb is a **lost** lamb. On this Good Gate/Good Shepherd weekend, we remember that our most important identity is that of members of the holy flock. The Good Shepherd does care about us as individuals, but is **most** concerned about us as a community. The

Good Shepherd protects and nourishes us both personally and corporately. The Good Shepherd leads this faith family as a **whole**, and not just its individual members. This flock has a responsibility to discern where the Good Shepherd who is also the Gate is leading us in mission. To whom is He sending us out? What is He asking of us? **Why** has He blessed us so richly??

He is the gate who has led us in. May He shed light on where, when, how, to whom He would have us go out. Amen

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