

THE SHEPHERD, THE DOOR, AND THE LAMB

John 10:1-11

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series A)

May 3, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 10, verses 1 through 11. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us how every blessing we have is through him. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 10, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. ² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

⁶ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Imagine we have a softball team. We show up for our game, but we only have six players, and none of us are particularly good. We need nine players to field a team, but even if we had three more players like the original six, we wouldn't have a very good team. We're still going to lose.

But then a new guy shows up. He says, “Hi. I am Joshua. I am good.”

We say, “Great! We need a pitcher, a shortstop, and a center fielder.”

He says, “I can do that. I am good at all of those.”

We say, “Uh, so which one do you want to do?”

And he says, “All of them.”

This would be confusing. Either this guy is so good that he can play all three positions at the same time, which would be superhuman, or he's insane, or he's a liar and really has no idea what softball is, in which case he's probably even worse than us.

Or suppose you're putting on a play, and this guy, Joshua, wants to do everything. He wants to be the lead actor, and the supporting actor, and the director, and the props. And I don't mean that he wants to be in charge of the props, but that he actually wants to be the props ... in addition to everything else he's doing. Sounds kind of crazy, right?

Well, that's the sort of feeling Jesus gives us when he talks about being the Good Shepherd and the door. It's like he wants to play every part in this metaphor. Next thing we know he's going to want to be a lamb too!

This passage has a way of confusing readers. The first part seems fairly simple. Jesus talks about the shepherd and contrasts him with the thieves and robbers. He talks about how the shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know the shepherd. So far, this is fairly easy to understand. The Pharisees, who heard him say these things, did not understand (10:6), but we, as Christian readers, figure that Jesus is comparing himself to a shepherd who knows his sheep and protects each one. So far it's fairly easy to understand.

But since his original audience did not understand, Jesus shifts metaphors and says, **"I AM the door of the sheep"** (10:7). Now it gets a little confusing. It seems that Jesus was just comparing himself to the shepherd in this metaphor, but now he says he is the door. So maybe he wasn't the shepherd. Maybe the shepherd in the first part was someone else. But then Jesus goes back to the shepherd thing and says, **"I AM the good shepherd"** (10:11). So he is the shepherd, and he is the door. How can he be both?

There are two basic ways to understand this passage. One way is to say that in the first part, when Jesus talks about the shepherd, he's talking about someone else. That is, he's talking more about pastors, or what we might call "under shepherds"—people who shepherd God's flock by his command. But then when Jesus talks about the *good* shepherd, he is certainly talking about himself. That's one way to understand this passage.

The other way, and I think this is the better way, is that Jesus is just talking about himself the whole time. He's the shepherd at the beginning, the door in the middle, and the good shepherd at the end.

Both ways are in agreement with the rest of Scripture. And in both ways, Jesus is most certainly the door and the good shepherd, because he says he is. So neither way gets us out of this confusion of Jesus being multiple elements within the same metaphor. We get the sense that Jesus wants this to be all about him. If we didn't know better, we might think Jesus is a narcissist like the guy who thinks he should play every position on the diamond and fill every role in the play. But Jesus makes this all about himself, not for his own sake, but for our sake.

So Jesus makes a pretty big deal of himself in this passage. The first way he does so is in the way he says, **"I AM"** (10:7, 11). There is more to this than originally meets the eye in English. This is actually a reference to the Old Testament name, "Yahweh." This is the personal name that God revealed himself by when he spoke to Abraham, Moses, and many other saints in the Old Testament. The name "Yahweh" is simply Hebrew for "I am." In our English Bibles it usually gets translated with the word "LORD" in all capital letters. So whenever you're reading the Old Testament, and you see the word "LORD" in all capital letters, feel free to substitute the name "Yahweh," because that's what the Hebrew actually says there. Read it as, "Yahweh said to Moses ...," or, "Yahweh said to Abraham ..." You can even translate it into English as, "I AM." "I AM said to Abraham..." or, "I AM said to Moses..." because that's what "Yahweh" means.

So when Jesus says, **"I AM the door,"** and, **"I AM the good shepherd,"** he's assuming the divine name "Yahweh" for himself. He is claiming to be the one true God, who spoke to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all sorts of other saints in the Old Testament. This is a pretty big deal. You can't claim any higher status than this. It's like when you say, "Okay, Joshua, what

makes you think you can be pitcher, shortstop, and centerfielder, all at the same time?” And he says, “Simple; I’m God.” This is what Jesus means when he says, “**I AM.**”

Now it’s not like everyone is accidentally claiming to be God when they say, “I am a . . . piano player,” or, “I am a Christian.” But we understand Jesus to be claiming this for three reasons.

First, Jesus says this with emphasis. This doesn’t come through at all in English, but the Greek language has a regular way of saying, “I am,” and an emphatic way, which is designed to draw much more attention. That’s the way John records Jesus words.

Second, *The Gospel of John* has seven “I AM” statements from Jesus’ lips. John records statements like this so often, and in the same way, that we have to notice the pattern and see that in all of these passages, Jesus is claiming to be the one true God, who revealed himself as Yahweh in the Old Testament.

And third, whenever John records these statements, it’s always something significant, like “the door,” “the good shepherd,” “the bread of life” (6:35), “the light of the world” (8:12, 9:5), or “the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). He’s not claiming little things, when he says “**I AM.**” He’s claiming big, divine, spiritual things. And, especially here in John 10, when Jesus says, “**I AM the good shepherd,**” we remember how Yahweh is described as a shepherd in the Old Testament. We think especially of Psalm 23, where David says, “The LORD—Yahweh—is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1). Everyone would have thought of this when Jesus says, “**I AM the good shepherd.**” That is, Jesus is the “I AM” who shepherded King David.

Now let’s look at Jesus’ metaphor and how he uses it to make a big deal of himself. First, concerning the door. And don’t think of it so much as a door to keep people out, but a door to let people in. Doors can be used for both purposes. When a door is closed and locked, it’s just like a wall. But Jesus is comparing himself to an *open* door. And the purpose of an open door is to let people in and out. The way shepherding worked in ancient Israel was that you didn’t just have a big fenced in pasture that you let your sheep roam around in. Instead you had open pastures and one communal sheep pen. So multiple shepherds would use the same pen at night to keep their sheep safe, and there would be a watchman who stayed there overnight. That way you didn’t have to supervise your sheep 24/7. And there was only one door to the pen. Everyone who went in and out legitimately would have to go through that one door, and anyone who tried to jump the fence was obviously a robber, trying to avoid the gatekeeper. So in the morning the shepherds would go through the door, call their sheep, and lead them out of the door so they could find pasture. During the day they would wander from pasture to pasture, grazing as they went. And at night the shepherd would take them back to the sheep pen, where they would sleep safely. So in the morning, when the shepherd led them out, the door meant they were about to get food. And in the evening, when the shepherd brought them back in, the door meant they would sleep safely. So when Jesus calls himself “the door” it means that it is through him, and only through him, because there is only one door, that we receive both nourishment and protection. And this especially refers to spiritual nourishment and protection. It is through Jesus—the Word made flesh—that our spirits are fed, and it is through Jesus that we are protected from the evil one, the devil.

And then Jesus also calls himself “the good shepherd.” That is, everywhere we go, or at least everywhere we are *supposed* to go, Jesus leads us. And when we wander away, he seeks us and finds us. He actively leads us through this life. He feeds us. He protects us. He calls us by name.

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This kind of shepherding was far more intimate than other ways of raising livestock. When you used a communal sheep pen, you had to know exactly what sheep belonged to you, and they had to know the sound of your voice. That way, when you went to get them in the morning, you could call to them, or sing your little tune, and they would come to you. This way you didn't steal your neighbor's sheep. It wasn't like having one big fenced in pasture all to yourself, where all you need to do is count your sheep to make sure they're all there. Sheep were not just a number to these shepherds, but the shepherds actually recognized and knew each one, and the sheep knew the shepherd. This is the way Jesus describes his relationship to his believing saints. You're not just a number to Jesus. Jesus knows your name, and you know him. It's personal.

Jesus uses the metaphors of the door and the shepherd to describe the way he, as God, relates to his saints. But there usually comes a point where every metaphor breaks down. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a metaphor, but the thing itself. And the place where this metaphor seems to break down is when we get to the slaughterhouse. Think about this: why do shepherds raise sheep? Occasionally sheep are raised merely for their wool. That is, the shepherds fleece the sheep. But most of the time, shepherds raise sheep for the purpose of killing them. This is how shepherds make a living. The sheep lay down their lives, not of their own accord, but at the will of the shepherd. And I suppose the sheep have no idea this is going to happen. They just figure the shepherd is a really nice guy who takes good care of them. But then the shepherd comes one morning, calls them by name again, and the sheep think they're going to go find some nice grass again. But, instead, the shepherd turns out to not be a very nice guy at all, at least, not to them, not anymore.

So this is where the metaphor of Jesus as a shepherd seems to break down. Jesus does not slaughter Christians for his own financial gain. But instead of letting the metaphor break down, Jesus decides to flip it on its head. He assumes the role of the sheep, and the sheep receive the benefits of his death.

This is where Jesus sounds less like a good shepherd, and more like an incompetent shepherd, or maybe an insane shepherd. Shepherds are simply not supposed to die for their sheep. That's not the way it works. It's like a shepherd leading his sheep to the slaughter, but then saying to the butcher, "Take me instead." If you ever hear a shepherd talking this way, you should get him some help. When Jesus was done speaking, many of the Jews actually thought he had a demon and was insane for saying such things (10:20). This man believes he is God, and he believes he is going to die for us like a shepherd dying so his sheep can live. This sounds like the craziest thing ever.

As Christians, we hear so often about how Jesus died for us, that we become immune to the shock of it. So I hope this metaphor of the good shepherd revives the shock for us. It's supposed to shock us.

And it's supposed to teach us that Jesus is everything. He plays the part of the door. Through him our souls have access to nourishment and safety. He plays the part of the shepherd. He knows us by name and we know him. He leads us and protects us. And when death comes, he even plays the part of the sheep. To be more precise, he plays the part of the sacrificial lamb, who bears the sins of his people. We sang, "For the sheep the Lamb hath bled, Alleluia!" ("Christ, the Lord Is Risen Today, Alleluia!") And then he rises from the dead, so that he might lead us through the valley of the shadow of death, and into his eternal house.

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Death still comes to Jesus' precious sheep, but since our good shepherd has already passed through death, he is able to lead us through it as well, "And [we] shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Ps. 23:6). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.