

## John 10:1-10

### “I Am: The Door”

Two Elders were invited to come to a confirmation class and share their faith experiences. When asked, both men sighted the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as their favorite. The teacher then asked if each man could recite this beloved passage for the young people. The first man happened to be an English teacher and drama coach. He repeated the Psalm in a powerful way. When he finished, the class clapped enthusiastically and asked him to recite more passages of Scripture.

Instead he deferred to the next gentlemen, who happened to be a contractor. He repeated the same words--'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...' but when he finished, not a sound came from the class. Instead, all of the young people were sitting quietly, awestruck, almost as if they were praying. You literally could have heard a pin drop!

Then the first man stood to his feet. “I have a confession to make,” he said. “The difference between what you have just heard from my friend, and what you heard from me is this: I know the Psalm, but my friend knows the Shepherd.”

When Jesus told the parable that included the statement “I am the door”, he offered it in the context of a much larger scope than we have time to examine today. But it is important for us to know that he tells a crowd of people this story after they have witnessed him healing a blind man. He does this to help some of the people in the crowd understand, namely the Pharisees, that we can have perfect vision but still be spiritually blind. Then he offers this “I Am” statement, which is followed by the reminder that Jesus came so that we could ALL have abundant life.

I tell you this because it makes the words of Jesus so much more powerful. When read all together, these passages remind us that Jesus knows us and calls us by name. God's desire is for everyone to know *Jesus* just as well. But only those who recognize his voice and go in and come out through the gate or door that God provides will receive the promise of abundant life. The two stories together remind us that ONLY GOD can decide who to call His own. And that it is God's desire that we all want to live abundantly. So, let's look at this a little more closely.

In ancient Palestine, many different shepherds might bring their flocks into the same village after a day of grazing so the flocks and the shepherds could rest. The sheepfold was where they slept and was usually a circular area, enclosed by rocks that were high enough to keep the sheep from jumping over them. They were topped with briars to keep wolves and other predators from climbing in. Kind of a precursor to barbed wire! The enclosure had one gate and the flocks all mixed in together.

Many might wonder how in the world the shepherds were able to separate the flocks in the morning since all sheep basically look alike. But even though sheep are fairly unintelligent, they know the sound of their shepherd's voice. And they only respond to the voice they know. So each shepherd would stand outside the door, call their sheep by name, and the sheep naturally follow the voice of their own master.

Some theologians will say that this parable is really about the doctrine of election. That God has given a certain number of individuals to Jesus and that, even though Jesus knows how sinful, disobedient and weak we can be, he will call us anyway. But he will only call *that* number – the number known ONLY by God. And theologically speaking, this is true. God's has named us and calls us even though we do not deserve it. And God knows who will respond to

his call. But I think to the average Joe sitting in the pew, it is more important to think about the tender, personal nature of the shepherd that helps us live abundantly!

In Jesus' day, the shepherd was so intensely interested in every single one of his flock that he could identify them by the sound of their cry and could actually "feel" when one sheep was missing without having to count them. That is the nature of our God who knows us so personally and uses our names to call us.

When I was studying Old Testament at Erskine Seminary, our professor told us the first night of class that his name was William Henry Frazer Kuykendall. One of my fellow classmates asked if we should call him Professor Kuykendall or Dr. Kuykendall, not really knowing what his credentials were. He replied, "The Lord calls me Bill – you can call me whatever you like."

Abundant life means knowing in our hearts that God can call us by our names. But it also means that we must recognize the voice of our shepherd. That's why the confirmation class was so awestruck by the second man who recited Psalm 23. It was clear that he had relationship with God that was deep and wide and high and long.

But there was also another kind of sheepfold that shepherds made use of in Jesus' day. You see, sometimes a shepherd was too far away from a village when night began to fall. In this case he would have to find a makeshift sheepfold, either by corralling the sheep into a cave or by pulling thorny brush around them as walls. Then once the sheep settled down for the night, the shepherd himself would lay down across the entrance and serve as the actual door.

This is the way that we receive the second provision from God for abundant life. Jesus is our door and a door serves two purposes: it keeps things in and it keeps things out! And knowing that we, like sheep, can also be prone to wander, Jesus is *our* door. He offers us safety,

but he also gives us the freedom to choose. He even told the people listening that day, “I am the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.” This is because God knows that we need a balance in our lives of time within the sheepfold and time out in the pasture.

When we stay within the sheepfold, we are protected. We are restricted. We are safe. We don't have to make choices – they are made for us. Being in the sheepfold is almost like coming to worship. When you come to church you read what it written, listen to what the pastor chooses or what the choir wants to sing. You don't get to offer feedback or argue with the preacher. You don't really have to make decisions at all. And hopefully your mind is allowed to focus on God and God's word and God's wishes for your life and the life of the church. This is a description of what Sabbath truly should be about. But not everyone chooses to come into THAT sheepfold.

I have told many a mother who worries about her adult children that no longer find it necessary to attend church on Sunday, that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you a car. It is God's hope that we will all want to come to church and spend time within the fold being nurtured and surrounded by those who have like values, beliefs and goals. And God will always be calling and waiting in hopes that we will enter. But our call as God's sheep would not be complete if we stayed within these walls all the time. A big part of abundant life is taking what you receive within the fold into the world and sharing it.

That is why the shepherd calls the sheep OUT of the sheepfold. We must have the freedom to grow and discover what other options are in the meadow. I read once: “You send a child off to college with simple faith and then she encounters complex doubt.” Yet, how can she

truly KNOW what she believe if she is never tested, never allowed to explore? Also, it is IN the pasture that we have the opportunity to work and witness for God. It is where we introduce others to God - people who may not have recognized God's voice when God called thier name.

Here is another analogy. It is truly a blessing to sit with a group of friends, or church members or family members and talk about the good old days. Our history and our heritage are a huge part of who we are. One of the things I love most about my call to ministry is hearing stories about things that happened at Nazareth in the past.

When I was sitting with Phil and Lane Stone, Ruby Stone's son and daughter-in-law, Phil told me about a summer when he and Steve Collins and Cissy Berry, or Amelia Senn as some of us know her, were in the Youth Group and they went on a mission trip to Mexico and painted a hospital. Ken and Jenny Collins and Harold and Ginny Edge were the chaperones. What a gift of grace that was for him to *recall* this time and for me to *hear* about it. It was like sitting within the sheepfold.

But God does not call us to glory *only* in our past accomplishments. God want us to continue to paint hospitals and feed hungry people and pray with the sick and take the Lord's Supper to those who can no longer come to worship. That is why God calls us OUT of the sheepfold. To share the Good News of salvation through Christ.

Many times, we need walls and fences to keep us in or keep us out. We need food for physical nourishment that is enjoyed in safe and clean places and times of worship that will nourish our souls. We need emotional boundaries to protect ourselves from those who want to hurt us or think only of themselves. But just as we cannot always live in the past, we cannot always stay where it is safe and serene. We must work for God – out in the pasture - in the present kingdom and help build a strong and sturdy sheepfold for future generations.

But there is also a third aspect of this story that I think really speaks to us today. When Jesus first told the parable, many people assumed that the sheepfold was representative of Israel. Of the Jews – God’s chosen people. This is understandable. When the Canaanite woman approached Jesus and asked him to heal her daughter who was possessed by evil spirits, Jesus replied, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

Yet here in the Gospel of John, Jesus himself seems to realize that God sent him to save the whole world. Perhaps once Jesus was in the world, it reinforced that every child of God is created in God’s image and has potential in the kingdom. So, God called the sheep of Israel OUT of the sheepfold and into the world, to minister to the Gentiles.

And Jesus’ words, “I am the Door” remind us that abundant life lived to the very fullest involves being in the center of God’s will. It’s not an easy, sentimental, romantic life. It’s one of rugged discipleship. It involves receiving Jesus Christ as your Savior. I could go out and purchase you an elaborately expensive gift and wrap it up and offer it to you. You could very well refuse to accept it.

It is possible to refuse this abundant life which Christ offers. Because something inside each of us knows that answering God’s call will reorganize your life. It will cause change. Any kind of change is threatening. You know that. I know that. We human beings, like sheep are creatures of habit. We are resistant to change. There is a strange comfort in the status quo. But each of us has to make a choice — an act of will to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior, acknowledging your need, if you want to experience abundant life.

I’d like to close by reminding you that the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways! I left the office completely worn out Thursday at 6:30 with no end to this sermon. I slept fitfully, worrying about how to wrap it up along with a lot of other things that I have SOOO much

control over like rain and how windy it would be at the grave on Saturday and the mass shooting in New Zealand. I finally decided that sleeping late on my “Sabbath” was not going to work. After breakfast, I pulled up my daily devotion from Henri Nouwen. His words were written about this passage: “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly. Nouwen wrapped it up for us. Here is what he wrote:

“Our lives are destined to become like the life of Jesus. The whole purpose of Jesus’ ministry is to bring us to the house of his Father. Not only did Jesus come to free us from the bonds of sin and death; he also came to lead us into the intimacy of his divine life. He came to lift us up into loving community with the Father. Only when we recognize the radical purpose of Jesus’ ministry will we be able to understand the meaning of the spiritual life. Everything that belongs to Jesus is given for us to receive. All that Jesus does we may also do.”

Friends, it is my prayer that we will all follow Jesus into the sheepfold for Sabbath and then out into the pasture when called, so that we might fulfill the individual destiny that God has planned for us all. Eternal life in Christ Jesus. Amen.