

**“Sheepish No More”**  
**John 10:1-10**  
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**Holy Way Presbyterian Church**  
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John 10:1-10

*I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw.*

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

*The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice.*

*He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*

*Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice.*

*They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice.”*

*Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying.*

*So Jesus spoke again,*

*“I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep.*

*All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them.*

***I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved.***

***They will come in and go out and find pasture.***

*The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy.*

***I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.***

Today is often called “Good Shepherd Sunday.”

It's a day where the lectionary focuses on Jesus as Shepherd, tending to his flock.

After hearing today's scripture passages, most of us can probably, almost immediately, picture rolling hills full of green pastures.

Psalm 23 reminds us how we're led by the Good Shepherd...

Led to still water.

Allowed to rest.

Kept alive.

And that even when we find ourselves in dark valleys, the Good Shepherd remains by our side.

Our passage from John probably also stirs up similar thoughts.

We hear more about pastures and being led.

We can picture the Shepherd by our side, looking out for our well-being.

But this time, we hear more about those wanting to do harm to the sheep.

And there's more focus on gates and pens.

Like many of Jesus' teachings, our passage comes to us with vivid language that awakens our imaginations and challenges our current understandings.

And this analogy is no different.

We see right away that there is a clear emphasis on gates.

"I am the gate," Jesus says.

Twice.

"I am the gate."

So this week I started thinking about all the kinds of gates we encounter, and why they exist there.

For instance...

- **Baby gates** - they help protect from potential danger, right? They keep babies - or in my case, my dog - in one area and not another.  
**Baby gates - they're good for sectioning off someone or something.**
- **Gated communities** - they keep residents from having to deal with random wanderers. Some communities have more vetting required than others, but either way the gate sends a message - residents only.  
**Gated communities - you have to know someone to get in there.**
- **Gates at airports** - you have to have certain things to go through the first line of security, and then again at your gate.  
**Airport gates - without the required documents, you're not allowed to enter.**

These gate examples seem to offer a clear idea of who's in or out, what's allowed and not allowed.

So what about the gate in our story? The one on the sheep pen.

What is its purpose?

Biblical scholar Elisabeth Johnsen explains that *“the function of the gate is to keep the sheep together in the sheepfold during the night, safe from thieves and predators.*

*[But] during the day the gate is opened so that the sheep can go out, following their shepherd, to find pasture.*

*The gate and the shepherd work together for the well-being of the sheep, so that the flock thrives.”<sup>1</sup>*

With this understanding, we begin to see similar images of sheep being cared for by their shepherd.

We see the protection offered in the pen, by the shepherd.

For it is there - together - where they learn about the shepherd’s voice.

What it sounds like.

When it’s used.

And why.

Jesus is both the gate and the shepherd at the same time.

He guards and protects his sheep from danger, and he provides for their nourishment, for their life in abundance.

Reflecting on Jesus’ use of this analogy, Jill Duffield writes,

*“[It] seems Jesus knew something about sheep.*

*They are fearful, not keen on change, in need of protection and a leader.*

*They must be called repeatedly, assured it is safe to move.*

*Thankfully, that is exactly what Jesus provides.”<sup>2</sup>*

But did you notice something?

As comfortable as the pen may be, that’s not where the sheep are supposed to spend all their time.

While the gate helps keep the sheep safe, it’s not intended to section them off indefinitely.

It’s not just supposed to keep them in.

Or just keep others out.

In the daytime - or perhaps when the shepherd knows they’re ready - the gate on the pen is flung open and that same shepherd **leads them out to pasture!**

*“I am the gate,” Jesus says. “Whoever enters through me will be saved.*

*They will come in and go out and find pasture.*

*I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.”*

As part of Jesus’ flock, we, too, are brought in by name and voice.

The Good Shepherd offers us comfort and protection.

To have life.

To live life to the fullest.

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Elisabeth. [www.workingpreacher.com](http://www.workingpreacher.com), May 7, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Duffield, Jill. *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 5, 2017.

We experience this as a congregation here at Holy Way every time we comfort, support and encourage one another.

Every time we gather to worship and celebrate Communion.

But the Good Shepherd doesn't want us to stay locked up in a pen - or confined to our church walls - or stuck in old patterns of being - for fear of change.

**As Jesus' sheep, we are called back out through the gate, confident in the Shepherd's love for us, in order to thrive individually and as a community.**

I was at retreat in Green Valley last weekend along with pastors in our presbytery. Our presenter was Tom Long, and he told us a story about a man named Marshall. Tom and his spouse attend a church in downtown Atlanta right across from the Georgia Capitol, a church that's known for its homelessness outreach and social justice advocacy.

They got to know Marshall at an inquirer's' class when they joined the church.

As part of the introduction at the beginning of the class, participants were asked the classic question: What drew you to this church?

Tom said while there were many different answers, they fell in similar categories -

- *"My wife and I love the preaching,"* one couple said.
- *"The music! We love the choir."*
- *"It's so easy to park here!"* another admitted.
- *"We heard that this youth group is top-notch, and now that we have teenagers, we need a good place for them to go."*

So round and round like this it went - very real, but somewhat light answers.

And then they got to Marshall.

"This place saved my life," he said.

Marshall went on to explain that he first found his way to the church through their outreach program.

This program helped Marshall get his basic needs met - food, a shower and a safe place to sleep - during a time when he needed that more than anything else.

And then he started to get more involved.

He started to volunteer in the program, helping others to get what they needed.

He became a known presence in the outreach center, and he was really good at what he did.

And then right around Christmastime, he disappeared.

M.I.A.

Folks at the outreach center and in the church didn't know what happened to him.

And then Tom got a call - Marshall was in jail.

Feeling compelled to support Marshall through whatever was going on, Tom decided he needed to visit. So Tom went down to the jail and sat in front of him, staring through one of those plexiglass windows.

He picked up the phone, "What happened, Marshall?"

Expecting all kinds of answers - he went back to drugs and alcohol, he committed a crime while intoxicated, etc. - Tom was shocked to hear Marshall's answer.

"The church has saved my life. I've found community and forgiveness and new life. But I had an outstanding warrant from years ago, and after being at the church a while, I knew I needed to turn myself in and make right on that so I could move forward. So on Christmas Eve, I did. But in two more months, I'll get out of here and back to the outreach program, ready to get back to work!"

Led to the church and nurtured there, Marshall was then led back out to serve the world - and others.

He knew he couldn't hide there at the church, as comforting as it was.

That's not the point of the sheep pen.

But it did play a critical role in redirecting his life, and pushing him to live life fully.

The beauty and abundance of the pasture is available to all of us, to whoever hears Jesus' voice.

But we must be willing to trust the leader and follow, if we are ever to experience it.

It can be tempting to make Jesus a wall instead of a gate, a barrier instead of a place that offers access, a stern guard instead of the Good Shepherd.

We do that when we act out of fear rather than trusting the One who knows us, calls us by name and leads us out.<sup>3</sup>

So as Jesus' flock here at Holy Way Presbyterian Church, how do we keep being a place of comfort and nurture, rooted in God's love, but not scared of reaching out?

Moving beyond our walls?

Following God's voice into the wider world?

In so many ways, we are already doing this.

But like in our text, God's call to us has a relentless rhythm.

*Called in together to be fed and nurtured -*

*Called back out to serve.*

*Called in together to be fed and nurtured -*

*Called back out to serve.*

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<sup>3</sup> Duffield, Jill. *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 5, 2017.