

## THROUGH THE GATE & INTO A FULL LIFE

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel Lesson for this Sunday will be our text. From John chapter 10, we listen again to verse 9:

*I am the gate for the sheep; whoever enters through me will be saved.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

The 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel, the Good Shepherd chapter, contains some of the most vivid and picturesque imagery in the Bible. It contains some of the most comforting and assuring words and teachings for believers, and the words of this chapter have inspired countless beautiful works of art such as the large stained glass window in the back of our church. But did you know that these beautiful images of Jesus as our Good Shepherd are born out of controversy, and are spoken by Jesus in response to harsh criticism?

Jesus had just healed a man who had been blind from birth. He was well known, because people had seen him begging in Jerusalem for years. Some of the blind man's neighbors took him to the Pharisees, the most respected religious leaders of the day. These religious leaders wanted to "investigate" the miraculous healing. When the formerly blind man insisted that Jesus had healed him, the Pharisees "threw him out" of the synagogue. They excommunicated him.

When Jesus heard that the man had been treated so shamefully by the religious leaders, he went looking for him and eventually found him. Jesus had already given this man the gift of physical sight. Now Jesus gave him something far more precious and far more necessary, the gift of spiritual sight, the ability to see Jesus as his only Savior from sin. Some of the Pharisees who were present at that time objected to the fact that Jesus called them "spiritually blind" guides. That objection by the Pharisees is what led Jesus to speak these words of our text.

As the religious leaders of the nation, the Pharisees were responsible for being shepherds to God's people, keeping them spiritually safe and spiritually nourished. But the truth is they had become spiritual thieves and robbers who were leading the people astray with their many additions to God's Word. They were teaching the people to rely on their own abilities to earn God's favor. They were teaching the people that salvation was achieved by obeying a set of rules and regulations which they themselves had concocted. The Pharisees were not being reliable shepherds. They were leading the people to spiritual destruction. In the first of two different images, Jesus teaches us that not all people who claim to be spiritual leaders are safe to follow.

Jesus set the scene:

*<sup>1</sup> "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup> The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.*

Jesus uses the image of a sheep fold similar to the one which we have pictured on the cover of today's worship folder. A sheep fold was a stone-walled enclosure with only one opening. Sometimes they were located near the villages or towns where the shepherds lived. Sometimes the sheep folds were built far out in the desolate countryside where the shepherds led the sheep to graze.

The sheep were put into the enclosure at night for protection from wild animals and sheep-stealers. The watchman of the sheep fold only permitted access through the gate to the legitimate shepherds. Those people who did not enter the sheep fold by the gate, those who would sneak over the wall, were up to no good. They were robbers or thieves. In picture language Jesus was saying that the Pharisees were robbers and thieves, not shepherds who were interested in the well-being of the flock. They were not the kind of spiritual leaders that the people could safely follow.

Robbers and thieves still attack the flock of believers. Sometimes they come carrying Bibles, claiming to be Christians, but proclaiming a very different message. Let me give you two examples, Jehovah's Witness and Mormons. Jehovah's Witness and Mormons use plenty of Bible passages, but if you were to follow them, they would not lead you to Christ. They would not show you your sins and then show you Jesus who has paid the price for your sins. These are spiritual leaders who come "to steal and kill and destroy." They do not speak with the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Sometimes several flocks of sheep were kept in a single sheep fold for the night . This was done to provide them all with safety. The flocks would mingle until the morning, when the sheep were separated by the call of their shepherd.

*<sup>3</sup> The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.*

Sheep knew the voice of their shepherd who had been caring for them and feeding them and protecting them all their life, from birth. When he would call to them in the morning, the sheep would separate themselves from the other flocks and gather around their shepherd. When the shepherd had called out all of his sheep, he would lead them out to pasture and they would follow because they knew his voice.

<sup>5</sup> But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

The sheep didn't get to know their shepherd's voice overnight. They needed to spend many days in the fields with him before they had confidence in him. When Jesus healed the blind man, instead of being received with praise, his motives were questioned and he was accused of being in league with the devil. In this word picture about sheep and thieves and the Good Shepherd, Jesus was saying, "Just listen to my voice. Do the words I speak to you sound comforting? Do they fill you with forgiveness and hope? Then follow me!"

You see, the Pharisees were continually using threats and rules and regulations which had led the people astray. Jesus said, "That's not the way I lead. I don't lead with threats. I just lead with my voice." The Good Shepherd's voice can still be heard. The Good Shepherd's voice speaks to you in his Word. You can listen to his voice every day in personal Bible study, and in daily home devotions. You can hear the Shepherd's voice and study his word with regular church and Bible Study attendance.

Wherever the Shepherd's Word is read or heard, there his voice is speaking to his sheep; calling out to his sheep to bring them back when they wander off, comforting the sheep with the message of forgiveness when they have fallen into sin. We daily fall into sin and daily we need to hear the Shepherd's voice, because with the Good Shepherd, we are kept safe from the thieves and robbers of our souls and we are kept safe for eternal life in heaven.

Because the crowd didn't understand the image of sheep and thieves and robbers, Jesus used a second image.

<sup>7</sup> *Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep . . .*

<sup>9</sup> *I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved."*

There is only one way to get into heaven, to get into God's sheep pen, and that is through Jesus, the Gate. In other words, entry into heaven is only obtained through faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Elsewhere Jesus tells us,

*"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6 NIV).

This is not a popular teaching in our society. Christianity takes a lot of heat for being "judgmental" when we repeat what the Bible clearly tells us, that faith in Jesus is the only way to heaven.

When asked what is necessary for salvation the Apostle Paul answered,

*"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved . . ."* (Acts 16:31 NIV).

The Apostle Peter boldly proclaimed that faith in Jesus was the only way to be saved. He said, *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12 NIV).

Jesus couldn't be more clear when he said,

<sup>17</sup> *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”* (John 3:17-18 NIV).

Our Good Shepherd says that he is the Gate, the only way to get into heaven. Unlike the thieves and robbers who have come up with all sorts of things a person needs to do to gain eternal life, the Good Shepherd says to each believer, “There’s nothing you need to do. I have done it all. You are not saved by what you do but by what I have already done.”

What other spiritual leader do you know, who would allow himself to be blamed for all the evil and vile and wicked deeds of others? What other spiritual leader do you know, who would allow himself to be executed, in your place? What other spiritual leader do you know, who has not only died, but has risen from the dead? What other spiritual leader do you know, who offers the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, to all people, free of charge, no strings attached? Jesus is the only one and he is the only way to eternal life.

<sup>10</sup> *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Jesus promises a “full life.” When it comes to sheep, there’s really only a few things they need, food, water, shelter and a good shepherd. As long as they have that, they have a “full life” in their sheepy minds. They don’t worry about what kind of job the shepherd is doing. They don’t want to be shepherds, themselves. They are just content and happy with being sheep. It’s kind of funny isn’t it? Dogs are happy with their “dogginess.” Sheep are happy with their “sheepiness.” But humans never seem to be content with their “humanness.” Doesn’t it almost always seem as if we’d feel “real contentment” if we just had one or two more things?

What is your idea of a “full” life? Even when you have the essentials of this life, food, water, clothing and shelter, and even more than that as Christians - when you have the promise of eternal life in Christ - how many of us really feel God has given us a “full” life? No, we want more out of life than just the bare essentials. Another job. A bigger house. A nicer car. A promotion and a raise. More money, more influence, more friends. It is tempting to equate a full life with an abundance of earthly things. (God forgive us when we slip into that kind of thinking.)

The full life that is ours through Christ does not necessarily involve comfort, wealth, or an abundance of worldly things. When Jesus talks about a full life, he is referring to a life full of the things of God, his constant presence in your life, his protection of you from your enemies, his steadfast unwavering love for you, his abundant forgiveness that is full and free, the absolute certainty of your salvation, his promise of eternal life in his presence.

Through faith in the Good Shepherd, Jesus, you also, pass through the Gate and into a full life. Amen.

