

May 3, 2020

The holy gospel according to John...**Glory to you, O Lord**

**Gospel: John 10:1-10**

[Jesus said:] <sup>1</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear 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 ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

The gospel of the Lord...**Praise to you, O Christ**

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace from  
God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

This is the traditional Good Shepherd Sunday. And I love it... This is one of my favorite Sundays of the year!

As you know, I had sheep for fourteen years... I kinda miss it, especially this time of year. I loved sitting on our porch and watching the Ewes and the lambs running and chasing around the pasture. It was great! In my office I have all kinds of pictures of sheep.

In our present culture sheep are metaphors for cute, quaint, or cuddly. All these images are generally positive and so it's not too difficult for us to imagine ourselves as sheep. In fact, we might think, "Isn't it cute when the bible refers to us as sheep!" Baaaaaa...

Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. In Jesus time, sheep were not metaphors for cute and cuddly, sheep were sheep and used for food, and wool. Just very practical...

Quick story... I remember watching the sheep one evening on our porch with some good friends, going back to college days. Neither of them had lived on a farm. We were talking and watching the sheep... When suddenly the wife looked startled and totally out of the blue, she asked, "What do you do with the sheep?" Her question was a little pointed.

I realized; she was just connecting the dots... Behind her question was the sudden awareness that lambs were not pets.

So, I looked her straight in the eye and said, "When they reach a hundred and twenty pounds they'll go to the slaughterhouse." She looked horrified. Her worst fears were confirmed and suddenly, she seemed distant from the conversation. She was processing...

So, the way we think of sheep today, and the way the people thought of sheep during Jesus time, is different.

In my office I have a painting of a lamb with its legs tied up and its neck stretched out to be sacrificed. According to the book of Leviticus, if you wanted God's forgiveness, you would go to the temple and buy a lamb and give it to the priest, who would do his thing and you would be forgiven...

In the fifth chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus heals a man near the Sheep Gate. It was a place of business... Where the shepherds sold their lambs to the money changers in the Temple. Sheep going through the Sheep Gate were destined to be sacrificed on the altar.

So, when Jesus compares us to being sheep, it's not cute or quaint thing, it means we live at the whims of others in a dangerous and violent world! And we do, we live in sin and we are in bondage to sin. It's our context... Whenever I see that picture of the lamb ready to be sacrificed, I think, yup, that pretty much sums up what we human beings do each other.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus refers to himself as a gate to a sheep fold. In other words, the gate to a corral. In the sheep world. Gates are used for protection, and gates are also used for control. Slaughter houses are full of gates...

Jesus says, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." Do you see what Jesus is saying?

In my office, next to the painting of the lamb about to be sacrificed, is a painting of Jesus standing in the midst of a flock of sheep with a lamb across his shoulders. That's what Jesus does, he opens the gate that would hold us in sin and death, and leads us out into pastures of abundant life.

Quick story... Brad Deitner and I used to shear sheep together. Brad was the professional, I was the tag-along. And Brad gives me permission to tell this story...

One day we sheared a couple of smaller flocks. At the second place we went, the guy came out of the house dressed like he was going to church; very clean and proper. He talked about his suits and ties...

We on the other hand had just finished a small flock and were filthy dirty from head to toe, sweaty, bloody, and full of, well you can probably imagine...

Where ever we sheared we had an understanding, the job of the owner was to handle the sheep, to catch them, bring them to us and tip them up; this kept us busy shearing-- we didn't have to waste time chasing and catching.

This guy unfortunately, didn't have the first clue how to handle sheep. So, we coached him, told him to put the sheep in a confined area where they'd be easier to catch. There was a horse stall in the barn, so we helped him get the sheep situated.

We had all the equipment set up, the boards were down, the bagger was up, the equipment was adjusted; so we looked at him and asked if we could start with the biggest ones. His posture slumped; he looked into the horse stall, took a deep breath, and said, "Okay, I'm going in..." Brad and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes.

We waited patiently for him to come out with a big ewe, but instead he came out wrestling a tiny little ewe lamb. Well, it got loose, and he went chasing after it, leaving the door open and the rest of the sheep promptly escaped. Brad and I started laughing. It was just a little comical. And the poor guy was embarrassed beyond belief.

And it seemed the harder he tried, the worse things got, and the funnier it became. And then we realized he wasn't laughing with us. And I remember feeling a little ashamed. He knew we were laughing at his expense...

This sinning stuff happens so quickly and innocently. We didn't feel like we were crucifying him, but I'm not so sure he didn't see it that way. So, Brad and I changed our ways, we did a little repenting, and started being helpful and encouraging. And by the time we left, we were all good friends...

The good news this morning is that through the crucified and risen Lamb of God, there is a way out of that corral of sin and death. As we live into our baptism, as we confess our sin to one another, as we reconcile with one another, Jesus calls us out to nourishing pastures of love and mercy, full of meaning and purpose. And we follow him because we recognize that voice...

In our brokenness, the calling us to reconciliation... In our despair, the calling us to hope... In our darkness, the calling us to the light...

Jesus leads us beside still waters; he restores our soul. Amen...