

“Being Shepherd”
Text: John 10: 1-11

Prayer: Good Shepherd God, open us to your words of life so we may fully understand the depth and width of your love. Amen.

Here we are again on the 4th Sunday after Easter known as the Good Shepherd Sunday. As expected, we are again drawn to the familiar imagery of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John chapter 10. It was the same imagery drawn from Psalm 23 of God the Shepherd who provides for the needs and one who cares and protects the sheep from danger. In today’s 11 metaphor-packed verses in John, Jesus was not only portrayed as the Good Shepherd but also as the Gatekeeper and the Gate. But wait, did you actually understand what John was doing in this text? How can Jesus be the gatekeeper if he’s already the gate? How can he be the gatekeeper or the gate, if he’s the shepherd? It seems like John could not make up his mind and to solve his indecision, he uses all these three images to portray who Jesus is. How confusing is that? And to make it more exciting, John also included other characters - bandits, thieves, strangers with eerie voices and of course, the sheep. As always, John is such a black and white guy who groups people into the “insiders” and the “outsiders”. I don’t know about what you think, but this gospel reading makes me cringe because I felt that John was showing us an exclusive Jesus who only cares for those in his fold. Instead of a welcoming, inclusive shepherd, I get the sense that Jesus is like a ticket master – checking your membership identity before you are able to enter the gate.

There’s also a danger in reading this passage from a point of privilege and self-righteousness, assuming that we who belong to a Christian church are automatically the “insiders,” the chosen ones, the saved ones. And when we go astray listening to other shepherd’s voices, we’ll never pass the Jesus membership club. Truth be told, there are indeed other seductive voices and numerous options out there that lure us to go away from life-giving endeavours. And following those voices – be it the voice of greed or hatred or indifference or unhealthy habits might lead us to our own demise – spiritually, physically, socially, emotionally. I don’t think this passage is meant to put us down *or* flatter us. I think there is still good news when we intentionally focus on John’s purpose in portraying Jesus as the

gatekeeper, the gate and the Good Shepherd. John wants to reveal Jesus to us. One who offers guidance, nurture, direction, safety and protection.

Shepherds, in the first century world, were one of the most marginalized groups of people. John knows this reality that shepherds belong to the ranks of peasants. Most of them work for a landowner or a rich patron. Their job description requires leading the flock to feed on green pastures, seeking strays before they fall victim to predators, and accounting for the well-being of the whole flock to the owner. The ancient law was such that if a shepherd lost any of the sheep to wolves, thieves, or carelessness, the shepherd was personally responsible for replacing that which was lost. Shepherds were even expected to literally lay down their lives for the sake of their flock. And I think this makes the gospel reading even more remarkable as a metaphor, as it shows Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as a caring companion on a difficult journey in the life of his flock. The sheep are completely dependent on the shepherd and on the shepherd's sense of responsibility and love for the flock. The Good Shepherd won't go home to rest until he knows all the sheep have entered their home. A shepherd, who, even when he is dead tired, gets up and continues looking and calling until the sheep are all safely home.

What about the symbolic meaning of the gate and the gatekeeper? When interpretation is left to ourselves, it's very hard to associate gates and gatekeepers with freedom or welcome or openness or making choices. We imagine those toddler or puppy gates, locked doors, a gated neighborhood, a checkpoint, a barricade, a demarcation line. We imagine gatekeepers as guards or bouncers or security officers or those who appraise people's status, colour, identity or creed before welcoming them. But what if that is not what John intends us to read? What if John wants us to see Jesus as a different kind of gate and gatekeeper? What if Jesus is a gate that opens out instead of closing in? Not a wall or a checkpoint but a place of safety – a breath of fresh air? That to enter this gate means liberation, transformation, a change for the better? Perhaps this is why John puts these words on Jesus' lips: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." I am totally in agreement with Debie Thomas' comments: "*I am the gate.*" Not, "I am the wall, the barrier, the enclosure, the dividing line." Not, "I am that which separates, isolates, segregates, and incarcerates." I am the gate. The door. The opening. The passageway. The place where freedom begins."

A true story happened in the modern-day Middle East, from a conversation between a journalist visiting that place for the first time and an Arab shepherd who does not have a single clue to this passage in John. The Arab shepherd was asked to describe what he does which could help us understand the image of Jesus as the Gate and Gatekeeper. At night, the shepherd gathers the sheep in a pen that has an open gap. Once he gathers them in, he also makes sure that the sheep are in good physical condition. He checks for bruises, or wounds that need to be looked after or things that need healing. When the journalist asked if a gate was put in the open gap to secure the sheep's safety, the shepherd's answer caught him off guard. The shepherd claimed – “no – there is no gate closing the gap because I am the gate! I lay down across that gap in the pen to make sure that the sheep were safe. The sheep will not trample over me because they recognize who I am. And they know my voice. Any threats or danger that comes to the pen would come to me first.”

The images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the Gatekeeper and the Sheep Gate come alive to us when we pick up the challenges of becoming good shepherds, welcoming gates and gatekeepers to others or when we commit ourselves to being faithful stewards of the earth. Our new creed says it beautifully, which I'm sure is a living praxis of BCUC: “We are called to be the Church – to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil...” We are called to care for each other and the world, working to make the world and our neighborhoods safer, peaceful and a haven for the vulnerable in our community – children, young people, women, the elderly, even our pets – and yes, we are called to carry the lost and the wounded.

Friends, what is it in you that resists entering the open gate? Where in your life journey are you being a wall, or not overly excited with better options for change? What sheepfold do you belong to, and whose voice do you follow and listen to? Are you willing to follow in the Good Shepherd's way of life or are you too afraid to take the risk? How can we as a church put Jesus' vision for freedom and inclusion into concrete acts of faith? What should be our tools in realizing this dream? John reminds us to be grounded in the Good Shepherd's love - to follow the ways of Jesus – who lived a life of risk, who taught about power-sharing, who uttered subversive prayers and commended truthful relationships. Jesus - who does not take the credit

of being a leader for the people but takes it only as his response to God's call. As shepherds and sheep's gates, we have a responsibility to our children and young people, to prepare them for what they will face in life. We have a responsibility to our seniors and elderly, to help meet their needs in a changing world. We have a responsibility to the community around us, to proclaim the good news of love by word and actions. Let the stories of faith, commitment, and service that are told today strengthen us, prepare us, and propel us into the countless years of ministry in this place.

Towards the end of this passage, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." An abundant life is not about quantity, success, fame, achievements or extreme wealth accumulation. Abundant life encompasses the deep qualities and values of who you are, or the things that matter most that give your life meaning and purpose. It is what opens your heart to others. Abundant life isn't our ultimate goal. It is the result of following Jesus, the life-giving, the Good Shepherd, the Gate and the Gatekeeper, who made the blind to see, who spoke truth to power, who fed the hungry and comforted the grieving. I invite you to meet and follow this Jesus. Be open. Welcoming. Inviting. Life-Giving. Amen.