John 10:1-15

10‘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.2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

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

11 ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

The book of John has many “I AM” statements of Jesus. Jesus says, “I am… the resurrection…the way, the truth, the life…the bread of life…the true vine.”In each of these statements Jesus gives his audience a metaphor to help them understand who he is and the relationship he has with them. These “I AM” statements also present an overall, fully encompassing way of knowing who Jesus is. In Exodus 3, Moses asks God, “who should I say sent me?” God answers, “Say I AM sent you.” So Jesus is identifying himself with God in general. This identity is further emphasized when Jesus explains says, “I and the Father are one.”

Today’s passage has two I AM statements: “I am the gate” (verses 7 & 9), and “I am the good shepherd.” (explicitly stated in verses 11 & 14, and implied in verses 2,3, & 4). This morning we’ll look at those 2 metaphors in order to better understand how we stand in relationship to Jesus, which will, in turn, lead us to either rejoice over that relationship or perhaps prompt us to make necessary changes in our lives that will tighten our relationship with Christ.

First, let’s get the context of this text: Jesus is in Jerusalem. He’s just healed a man born blind. The Pharisees interrogate this poor man, and eventually drive him out of the Temple for being impertinent. HE IS, IN ESSENCE, EXCOMMUNICATED. In that day and age, to be excommunicated was devastating. It was like being cast out of God’s presence. The blind man’s parents were afraid to answer the Pharisees inquiry because anyone confessing Jesus to be the Messiah would be driven out of the synagogue. Jesus looks for the man, finds him, reveals himself to be the Son of Man, and the healed man worships Jesus. Jesus says that he came into the world so that those who were blind might see and those who see may become blind. Some Pharisees near him say, “You talkin about us?” to which Jesus replies, “if you were blind, you’d have no sin, but since you say ‘we see’ your sin remains.” Then we go into chapter 10, today’s passage.

So Jesus is in Jerusalem, talking to a mixed lot, some Pharisees are near, but so are the man who was born blind and, presumably, other bystanders. And Jesus says that those who enter the sheepfold by any way but the gate are thieves and bandits. So in this little parable, who represents who? We can assume that we are the sheep (more on this later). We can further deduce that, since there are also Pharisees in the audience who have just excommunicated a man who now worships Jesus, that those Pharisees are the thieves and bandits. They would rob others of the joy of God’s grace made evident in Christ, and they would violently repress anyone who challenged their authority. They would enslave their followers to the Law, not leading them with compassion but rather with a legal mindset (2 Cor. 3:6 – “the letter kills, but the Spirit brings life”) that fails to comprehend God’s forgiveness and mercy. The Pharisees focused on the behavior and not the heart. (any good parent knows that the way you elicit good behavior in your children is not by setting rules but by loving them, and showing them how to love others.)

So if we’re the sheep, and the Pharisees are the thieves and bandits, who is Jesus? In verses 7-10: Jesus is the gate to the sheepfold. The sheepfold was the safe haven that shepherds would provide for sheep at night. One shepherd would guard the gate so the other shepherds could get some rest, and in the morning the shepherds would come to gather the sheep of their particular flock. For the sheep (and remember, you and I are the sheep), the sheepfold was the safe place to be. So is Jesus is the gate, it is through him that we enter the safe place, and also through him that we exit the sheepfold where we find our feeding ground, the green pastures, the abundant life that he promises us. The early Christians had been expelled from the Temple and the synagogues, and probably felt that they were in some danger, as we might feel today if our religious leaders expelled us from the Church. We might feel ourselves in Spiritual limbo, and be filled with doubts about our relationship with God. We may even approach our religious leaders in humility and plead to be re-admitted into the sheepfold. But Jesus is saying that *he* is the gate, that no mere *man* can deny another access to God. Our sanctuary is not in the Temple or in the synagogue, but in Christ. Jesus is telling this audience, “Don’t worry what others say about you – trust me. I am the gate.”

But while Jesus is welcoming those who are rejected by those who would deceive others for their own benefit, he is also making an exclusive claim: There is one gate to the sheepfold. In our very open-minded culture, we like to tell ourselves that Jesus is one gate among many. But to think in terms of many gates only draws our attention away from our one Redeemer and the one true God who extends perfect grace toward us through Christ. And to withhold any part of our selves from Christ is ultimately withholding our whole self. The gate to the sheepfold must be closed at times to protect the sheep that are within – and when it closes, you’re either inside or outside the fold. You can’t be both.

Jesus refers to himself not only as the gate but also as the good shepherd. Jesus calls his sheep, and they hear his voice and follow. During World War I, a battle-weary soldier was returning to the front having spent a week in the pleasant countryside of France. He wondered how he could face the horrors of war yet again, and as he marched he felt complete despair. While resting along the side of a road he spied a shepherd leading a little flock of sheep. Every once in a while, one of the sheep, distracted by something along the road, would straggle behind the flock. Noticing the straggler, the shepherd would call the sheep by name (!), and that sheep would trot to the front of the flock and rub his head affectionately against the shepherd’s side. Upon witnessing this, a sudden calm embraced the young soldier. He remembered how Jesus called Mary by name on the morning of the Resurrection, how he called Lazarus by name out of the darkness of the grave, and he remembered Christ’s presence is never ending.

Jesus, the good shepherd leads the sheep out of the sheepfold. Very often we think of the church as something we belong to, we dwell within, a place where we find safety among family, a sanctuary. I’m reminded that May 21st may be the end of the world. That there are Christian leaders who have declared this. And I’m sad to think what will happen to all those sheep who may discover that the world does NOT end on May 21st. Will they still trust their shepherd? Will they remain in the fold? Jesus himself claimed not to know the time it would come, yet some shepherds would be so bold as to claim special abilities to discern what God’s own Son could not? Do they honestly believe that assigning a date to the end of the world will lead people to Christ? Or is it, rather, their own wishful thinking, that by getting it right they will somehow be rewarded by escaping some suffering to come? True sanctuary is wherever God is present, and if Christ is in our hearts, everywhere is sanctuary. Outside of the sheepfold there is the valley of the shadow. But it’s a valley that Jesus himself has trod. It’s a valley of danger, where there is betrayal, there is brutality, there is greed, envy, selfishness…There are people who will not simply PLAN to kill you; they will kill you without even thinking about it. Unpremeditated. And they may desire more than anything else to kill you *spiritually.* But those who belong to the good shepherd hear his voice, hear him call them by name, and respond joyfully to his call. We are reminded in this Easter season, that despite the evil that would claim our own lives, Christ lays the final claim on our lives; he holds the final victory. He has laid down his life for his sheep and if we follow him, we have life through him.

Sheep are helpless. They need to be protected, otherwise they would be wiped out. We have a bad habit of “nibbling our way lost” – we are very prone to stray away from our good shepherd. But we can take some courage in knowing the Jesus recognizes our weaknesses and our vulnerability. And he will go to the ends of the earth to save those who belong to him.