

## *Competing Voices* Pastor Jim Bangsund

Interesting Gospel reading. This morning, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is known as Good Shepherd Sunday – because each year, in our three year cycle of scripture readings, the Gospel lesson is about Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep. Or sort of. This year, our Gospel lesson stopped one verse short of that well known “I am the good shepherd” verse and we are left with ... “I am the gate”? So what’s that all about?

Well, if you’ve been at St Timothy’s for any amount of time, you know that the first thing we do, when we are puzzled by a scripture reading, is take a look at what happens right before or right after what we’re reading. And right before these words from Jesus he has healed a man who had been blind from birth. This was all good until the jealous Pharisees heard about it. They hauled the man in, along with his parents, and grilled them over what had happened. Not liking the man’s answer – that Jesus had healed him – or his insistence that “if this [Jesus] were not from God he could do nothing” – the Pharisees threw him out of the synagogue. Sort of like excommunicating him. We then read:

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe”; and he worshiped him. Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, “Are we also blind?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.”

So we have a little tension here. Especially when Jesus then immediately goes on to say to the Pharisees – not to the disciples but to the Pharisees:

“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. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. (*And then he adds*) All who ever came before *me* were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.

... which, being aimed at the Pharisees, leads to some heated discussion right after the end of this section, as you can imagine.

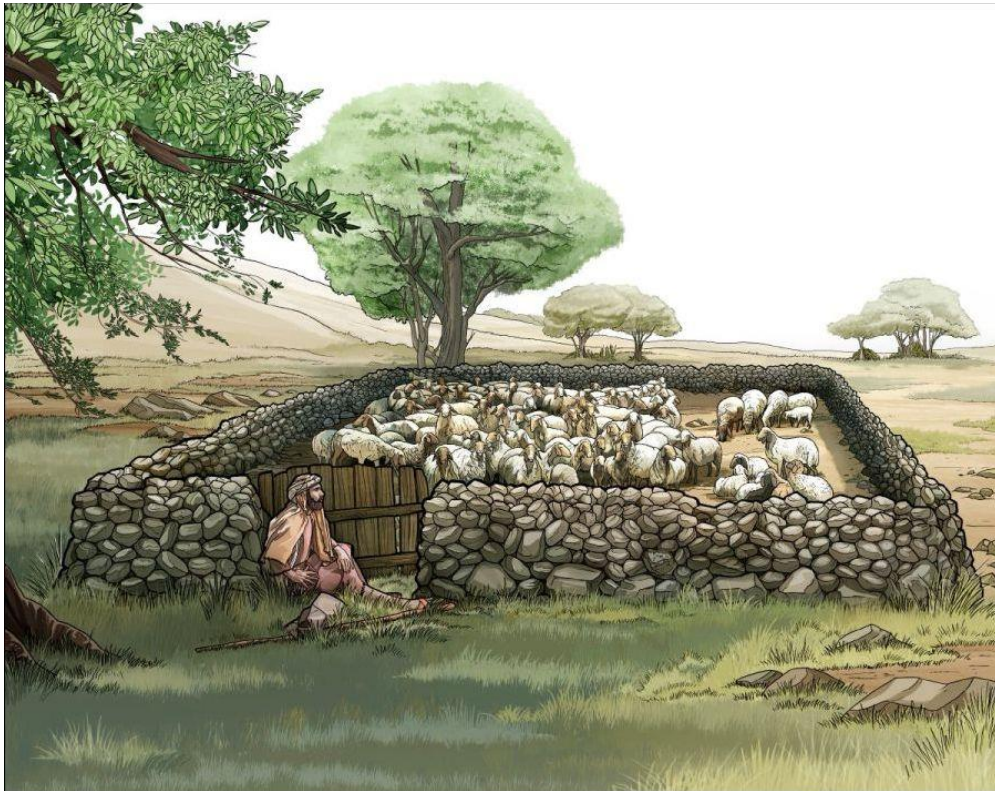
So it’s not a setting of sweetness and light – not the warm fuzzy image of Jesus with the little lamb over his shoulders. Some other stuff is going on – including this strange statement from Jesus, “I am the gate.”

Now, although Jesus’ words are directed at the Pharisees, others must have been around to write all this down. And the fact that his words have been put in the Bible mean they are for us, too. Yes, Jesus has some things to say to us here – and his style was to use familiar images so that people would understand. This time, it’s a shepherd, sheep, a gate, a gatekeeper and a sheepfold or sheep pen. Problem is, neither you nor I know a whole lot about these things, and if you are

very young you may have never even seen a real live sheep much less a sheepfold. So, for you kids – and maybe even for some of us as adults – here’s the idea.

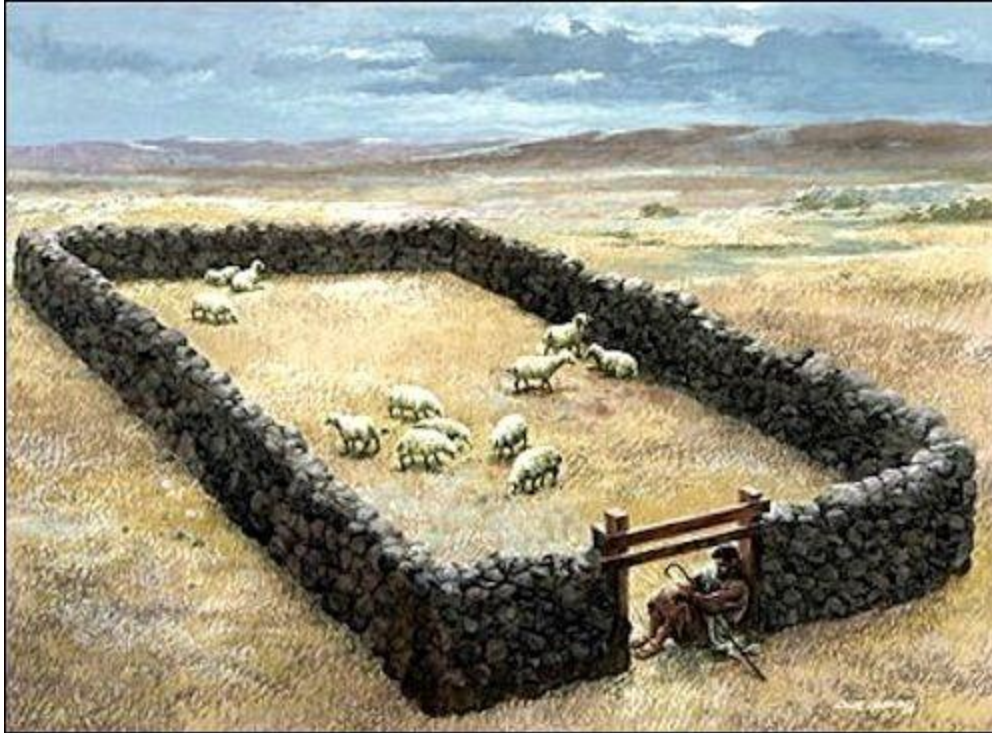
First of all, sheep, as you may have heard, are not real smart. They’re so interested in eating the grass right in front of their noses they don’t watch for the wolf who is sneaking up on them. So they need a shepherd to take care of them, to protect them from the wolf and to get them home safely at night.

During the daytime, the shepherd took care of the sheep, leading them from one grassy area to another so they could eat. At night, though, they needed a safe place to rest – so that the wolf or a thief couldn’t get at them. So folks would build sheepfolds or sheep pens – basically a wall around the sheep with a gate at one end.



At night, the shepherd would bring his sheep home to the sheepfold where there was a gatekeeper who would open the gate and let the sheep in. The gate was then shut, the gatekeeper guarded the gate while the sheep slept inside, and the shepherd could then go home and catch some sleep himself.

Sometimes, instead of a gate, the gatekeeper himself would just lie in the opening. Then, he *himself* was the gate.



Of course, the gatekeeper had to stay awake because, while the sheep slept in the sheep fold, the wolf and the thief prowled around outside, maybe even climbing in over the wall to grab a sheep.

So who are the sheep in Jesus' story? Does it surprise you that you and I are the sheep? And the sheepfold is like the Kingdom of God – the place where God takes care of us, as his children, and protects us and provides what we need.

So this is why, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus doesn't yet say, "I am the shepherd" or even "I am the gatekeeper" but rather "I am the gate." Remember that picture of the gatekeeper lying in the opening? Jesus is the gate because he is the way into the sheepfold – the way into God's kingdom. Jesus – not the Pharisees, and not all the laws and rules they insisted on, but rather Jesus – is the way we become God's children and enter into his sheepfold or his family or his kingdom. We enter through faith and trust in him.

That's what this Easter season is all about, of course. Because of our selfish turning in upon ourselves and away from God and our neighbor, God did the unexpected. Instead of lowering the boom on us he lowered his Son – into our world – covering him with our sin upon the cross and then covering us with his goodness. The Pharisees – who were normally pretty good students of the Bible – had just missed the point about God and grace. They totally didn't understand what Jesus was about. They had constructed a whole system of rules and laws they said folks had to obey to get on the right side of God, and had simply made life oppressive and into a heavy slog. Jesus' final words in our Gospel message drew a line in the sand and showed what a contrast he had brought: "I have come," he said, "that they may have *life*, and have it to the *full*" ... or, as some of us have learned that marvelous verse, "I came that they may have *life*, and have it *abundantly*." And so we do – because of Jesus.

But now let's get back to the sheep. We're the sheep in this story, after all, and I mentioned that sheep aren't too smart. And that's true – though that isn't the point that Jesus makes. Actually,

although there are a lot of ways in which sheep aren't very smart, there's one way where they do have us beat. They know, and they listen for, the voice of their shepherd. And that *is* the point that Jesus is making here. There may be a lot of other voices, a lot of *competing* voices – other shepherds, even thieves and robbers – but the sheep know the voice of *their* shepherd and they follow *him*.

Competing voices. We live in a world with a *huge* number of competing voices – advertising, entertainment, Facebook, sports, Netflix, the list goes on and on. If you are a serious follower of Jesus, the signal-to-noise ratio can get pretty low.

Jesus uses the example of sheep and their shepherd because everybody knew what he was talking about. Sheep and shepherds were real common for them. If Jesus were speaking directly to *us* today, he'd probably come up with a different example – perhaps that of folks distracted by their phones or Facebook or ... well, like I just said, the list is pretty long for us in this day and age.

You see, Jesus was speaking to people with limited opportunities for distracting entertainment – unlike us; people who lived in a culture in which, when the sun went down, everyone went home to dinner and then an evening with no electric lights, no computers or phones, no television, no video games. What on earth did they do??!! Well, they talked. Parents and children. They talked! Talked and told stories! Stories about what happened during the day; stories about their family history; stories about what God had done for their ancestors and what God had promised to do for them. They would also sometimes talk about how they were planning to live the next day in response to all that God had done and promised.

I sometimes think of the way life is portrayed in “Fiddler on the Roof,” with that marvelous scene of the sun setting on Sabbath eve, and the mother, Golda, lighting the Sabbath candles as the family gathered around to reflect on the week, on who they were before God, and to ask God's blessing upon them and their small community. Even with the specter of darker times hovering over them – the threat of persecution by a Russian pogrom – they could yet center themselves in the knowledge that God was still God and they were still his people. And they took the time to do so.

So how is all that working out for *you* today? Perhaps about the same way it is working out for me. Yes, even pastors have trouble clearing the decks of email and phone calls and the evening news and Netflix and Youtube and on and on until suddenly it's midnight and ... what ever happened to that time I was just quietly going to step back from it all to listen for the voice of God in reading his word ... and in coming to him in prayer.

When I think of Jesus trying to speak to us today, I sometimes have this image of a CEO leading a meeting with all the VPs sitting around the table with their laptops – half of them looking at Facebook or updating their résumés. Or a pastor teaching a confirmation class with students looking down – not at their notes, not at the table, but just a tad under the edge of the table ... texting. Would that ever happen with our confirmation students here at St Timothy's? Well, it's been seven years since I taught a confirmation class here, so I think I can safely give my answer to that question: ... I'll never tell. So, some of you college students out there ... your secret is safe with me.

So Jesus compared himself to a gate – and then to a shepherd for a number of reasons but for me the most interesting one was that matter of the voice. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd. But what happens to distracted sheep? What happens to you and me as followers of

Jesus – convinced followers of Jesus but distracted followers of Jesus? Distracted by all of our entertainment and social media and gaming and Netflix to the extent that – even with the extra time we may now have on our hands during this crisis – we may miss taking the time to hear the voice of our shepherd. I’m talking not to people outside faith, outside the church – though I hope some of those folks are hearing this, too – but rather to people like me, maybe like you, who can so fill the extra hours with “me” stuff that our Shepherd’s voice gets lost in the noise.

The other day, I came across some words by evangelist and writer W. Ian Thomas<sup>1</sup> which I’ve thought about ever since. He wrote:

The measure of [one’s] worth is the measure in which [one] no longer lives “to and for [one]self,” but “to and for Jesus Christ.” No more and no less!

The flesh, everything that you do apart from Him “profits nothing” (John 6:63), and there is always the awful possibility, if you do not discover this principle, that you may spend a lifetime in the service of Jesus Christ doing nothing!”

... that you may spend a lifetime in the service of Jesus Christ doing nothing. Well, not nothing at all, of course, but maybe nothing of what he is calling you to do. Perhaps simply because of distracting voices.

So let’s turn at least one element of this very trying Shelter In Place situation into something beneficial. You, like many, may have a bit more time on your hands. For some, it’s become the challenge of how to fill the evening hours without one more binge watch of “Star Trek” or “Downton Abbey.” Let me suggest that many of us – perhaps you included – simply are not used to, and are even a bit uncomfortable with, the idea of empty unscheduled time, of simply being alone with ourselves and our own thoughts – as people of past generations often were.

Now I know that, for some, the house is chaotic with kids throughout the day and into the evening – and there may be no help for it. But if you do come to the end of the day and start filling the last hours with Netflix and YouTube and Facebook, think about this. Perhaps this particular trying time in our history is actually offering you a chance to find a quiet corner to sit back and reflect, and listen for the Voice of the Shepherd. Perhaps start with the daily staff devotions we are sending out by email and see where they lead you and your thoughts. Perhaps spend some time of your own in God’s Word and in prayer asking, “Lord, how might you have me reshape my life? How can I be a part of what you are doing today?” And then, if, for this period in your life, you have a chance to do that kind of reflecting and listening and reading and praying ... perhaps the habit can grow to the point it continues for you once Shelter In Place has gone away. Which it eventually will.

I close with a final image. I remember one time seeing a picture from the Middle East of two flocks of sheep following their shepherds. One was headed north and the other was headed east and they ran into each other. Rather than one stopping to let the other pass, they both just kept going forward. The two lines of sheep intersected, one flock passing through the other, each following its shepherd, and not a single sheep got lost. They each knew the voice of their shepherd and, because they focused upon it, all ended up where they should.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W.\\_Ian\\_Thomas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._Ian_Thomas)

So ... dumb sheep? Maybe sheep just *know* that they're dumb – and that, with all the competing voices, they really need to listen for the voice of their shepherd. Maybe they're not so dumb, after all.

Let us pray ....

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the many opportunities given to us in this day and age. Yet, at the same time, we can find these many things – good things – competing against the best and most necessary thing, our walk and relationship with you. Help us to keep ears attuned to your voice and to that which you would say to us – in order that we might be completely invested in what you are doing in our world today. And then, through all we say and do, may you be glorified and those around us be served and drawn to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn after sermon “Savior, like a Shepherd Lead Us”