

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**  
**May 11, 2014**

**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.**

**"The Shepherd's Voice"**  
**Texts: Psalm 23 & John 10: 1-10**

The tiny town where I grew up had, and still has, a single main thoroughfare that splits the town, Route 34. About ½ block north, are the railroad tracks, the Burlington Northern, I think, though when I was young, it was the C, B, & Q Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy. We were pretty free in those days to run and ride our bikes around town. But we were not to go across the highway, which also meant staying away from the tracks.

At about age 10, I was able to join the team of traffic patrols. Equipped with our belts white in those days we would head out early on our appointed mornings to guide the little kids across the streets to school. When I was 12, I graduated to lieutenant and got to put a shield on my belt. I also got assigned to the highway and railroad tracks! What this involved was walking the few blocks to the downtown area, crossing the highway and going to the train station. I think there was still one train a day that stopped to drop off mail or to pick up the occasional passenger. Inside the station, besides the old pot-bellied stove in the waiting room, was the traffic sign. It was huge for a twelve year old and had to be rolled on its iron base across the tracks and down the block to its spot in the center of the highway. The traffic in this town did not warrant a stop light still doesn't in fact nor did it have a gate at the railroad tracks. So we, the patrols, were the gates. We held back the traffic and made a safe path so the children to cross.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, we read about different safe paths and gates. In Psalm 23, God is the shepherd who leads us through those familiar and comforting images of green pastures and still waters not unlike the land surrounding Galena. On a beautiful spring day like we had yesterday, it was easy to take in those very pictures!

When we turn to first ten verses of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, though, there is a very different image. It is not the picture from our church school classroom or children's Bible of the gentle Jesus with a woolly lamb resting around his shoulders. No, here, Jesus says he is a gate. A gate to the sheepfold the gate, in fact. He tells us that the one who enters by the gate is the shepherd whereas those who enter another way like climbing over the wall are thieves and bandits. If we read on to verse 11 (not in today's reading), he identifies himself as the good shepherd. So, I've gotten a bit muddled about the gate and the gatekeeper and the shepherd here. Maybe because in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world, even in a rural area like this, we are not likely to see shepherds. And sheep will be fenced in all the time, not just at night. Or, maybe my muddle is because Jesus's stories are not always straightforward!

The people in Jesus's time might relate more easily to this picture. In any event, it is one that seems to be less romantic than the psalm more of the nitty gritty daily grind of caring for the flock: making sure they get to the right place at night, through the gate and into the fold where they will be safe from wolves and other predators; leading them back out through the gate each morning to graze and feed.

I've tried to imagine gates in our time. They have several purposes. There are those that keep things in, and those that keep things out. Think about it prison gates or hospital locked wards, for example, keep

people *in* so they do not hurt themselves or others. We have gated communities and private clubs that keep others, the undesirables *out*. Gates at the zoo do a bit of both. For me, images from a trip to the Holy Land come to mind: gates and walls topped with loops of barbed wire, guarded by young soldiers with Uzis, lines of Palestinians hoping to cross through gates to find day work. Walls restricting access not only to work but to critical resources like water, food, and medical care. Or recent pictures from refugee camps in South Sudan where signs send people from different tribes to different part of the camp. These are gates that exclude and divide.

Some religious people in our time, in our country, use this passage to exclude others. They use it as *proof* that if Jesus is *the gate, the Way*, then those who follow other voices are just subject to the thieves who steal and kill and destroy. Even within Christianity, this division occurs. I've heard some of you recall your childhoods— maybe your parents were of different religious traditions, and you were told that one of them was most assuredly not going to Heaven.

Before we go that route, we need to carefully consider what the circumstances were for the people who lived in the time that John was writing his Gospel. It was a difficult time for all the Jewish people— those who followed Jesus and those who did not. The Temple had been destroyed by the Romans, so the Jews had to find a new way to practice their faith. At the same time those who followed the teachings of Jesus were forming their identity. It had become clear that their belief in Jesus as the Messiah was not going to be broadly accepted, and that they were, in fact, a new religion. John was writing for this group of relatively new Jewish Christians who had, by then, been thrown out of the synagogues and were subject to persecution. So, John was encouraging them to follow Jesus's teachings, Jesus's way.

If we look closely at the passage, we also see in the description of the sheep, the shepherd, and the gate that there is not just one shepherd. There may be many shepherds who have sheep in the fold. A sheepfold, where the sheep and shepherds spent the nights, was made of stone walls with only one opening, one way in or out. The gatekeeper would sleep across that opening, keeping predators out, until morning when the sheep would be led back to the pastures by their shepherds. There was no need for brands or for separating the flocks, because they all knew their shepherds' voices. So, my question is: what about those other shepherds? Were they all imposters? They entered by the gate, after all, not over the wall; their voices were recognized by the sheep. And, leaping a few verses ahead again, Jesus talks of having other sheep, those not in this fold, but who recognize his voice. Not so straightforward at all. Ah, the shortcomings of breaking up scripture into little chunks! This could be the subject of a lengthy and lively study, couldn't it? I'll leave you to chew on that.

Nevertheless, for those of us who follow Jesus, Jesus is the way. And all of our readings today are about God and Jesus as the shepherd. When I taught a seminary course on Pastoral Care I was reminded that this metaphor is often extended to clergy. Think of our bishops who carry crosiers, or shepherds' crooks as symbols of their office. So, what does that mean— clergy as shepherds? The first things we are likely to think of are that clergy are people who are called to care for the sick and the wounded, to seek out the lost, and, hopefully, to lead, encourage, and feed their flocks. To teach and to preach and help people grow closer to God. That all sounds good, doesn't it?

But there are some real dangers in this appropriation of the image by church leaders— whether clergy or lay. We can get carried away with our own importance and with the power of the office. We can get too comfortable with our own little sheepfold and guard the gate, decide who's in and who's out— often others most like us. We may forget the model of the shepherd who does not cast out, but calls all to follow. We forget that the model, the Good Shepherd, did not stay in the sheepfold where it was safe, but went outside of its safety and comfort. The task does not end with keeping danger away from the

gate. It may mean going beyond the sheepfold to deal more actively with the powers and principalities that threaten the whole flock. To protect the vulnerable from all manner of danger.

We can also become too limited in our scope, forgetting that the flock is much bigger than our own sheepfold, our own parish. The Good Shepherd calls us beyond our gates and even our pastures to care for all of the sheep, those who are subject to threats to their physical safety or denied access to basic human needs. That's why we support organizations that provide services to those in need. That's why we speak out, advocating for them and *fighting* against injustice for the marginalized: immigrants, throw away youth and children, the jobless, the underpaid. In our own country and across the world. This is why it is not just the President of the United States who releases statements against the abduction of school girls in Nigeria or the violence in Sudan, Syria, Croatia. It is also our Presiding Bishop, our diocesan bishops. It is not just private citizens who march against violence or poverty or who lobby for more just marriage laws. It is our clergy and our congregations. This is shepherding, too, the kind of shepherding that is active and edgy, not the calm and comfort of the green pastures. It is not possible to separate the pastoral from the political. Not if we are truly doing the job of the shepherd: caring for, rescuing, feeding all the sheep, tending to the weak and the lost. Not if we are truly following the example of the Good Shepherd.

Why should we do this? Why should we care? We are all part of the same flock - we all listen for the voice of our shepherd, our God. Our God sometimes calls us outside of our comfort zone. Beyond the pleasant pastures and flowing streams and into the dark valleys. But we know that even there, God is with us, giving us strength and courage. And we know that God ultimately wants us all to flourish - to take part in the abundance of love and grace that God offers to us - to each and every one.

You see, God wants to prepare the table for us, a bountiful table. God longs to anoint us with the fragrant oil and fill our cup of blessing until it overflows. God wants us to have life, and have it abundantly. All of us.

God's voice calls us. Do we recognize it? Do we follow?

Amen.