

SERMON TITLE: "I Am the Gate"
SERMON TEXT: John 10:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 17, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Like you, I've been hearing a lot of news stories about the difficulty of transporting food to the hungry people in Gaza. We know that Palestinians in the northern part of Gaza have been suffering the most. So I was glad to read about an event that happened on Tuesday this past week. "After clearing Israeli inspection . . . [a] convoy [of six trucks] entered the north directly through a gate on the security fence that had not [previously] been used for aid deliveries."¹ The Israeli military said that allowing the United Nations' World Food Program delivery through this route was an experiment. I assume that means they intended to evaluate how it went and then make decisions about any future possibilities. For the sake of the Palestinian people, I certainly hope that it went well. I hope that food can continue to be trucked through that northern gate.

Since Lent began, we've been considering the "I am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel according to John. So far, we've pondered what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the bread of life," and "I am the vine." Today, we return to John 10, where Jesus spoke about being the good shepherd. But in this same chapter, we also see Jesus using the imagery of the sheepfold itself. So I invite you to picture what was probably a rock-fenced enclosure, where the sheep would be kept at night next to the shepherd's house. Now consider with me what Jesus might have meant when he said, "I am the gate."

1—GATE OF IDENTITY

As we look at these verses in John 10, first of all, we see that Jesus is the gate of identity. In Jesus' imagery of the sheepfold and its gate, several different types of characters identified. There's a gatekeeper, who manages the gate. There's a shepherd who legitimately enters through the gate.

There are the sheep who also come and go through the gate. And there are the thieves and bandits who aren't allowed through the gate, so they climb over the fence in their efforts to steal the shepherd's sheep.

Having watched a lot of western movies over our lifetimes, we may be more familiar with the idea of cattle rustling from a field than sheep stealing from a pen. Or maybe we recall what a terrible crime it was to steal someone's horse. The idea is the same. Bandits want to take the precious animals that don't belong to them. Thieves want to steal livelihood from the legitimate owner. Fortunately, both the gatekeeper and the sheep know the difference between the true shepherd and the thieves. Having had a gate to close them in and help them gain a specific group identity, the sheep are clear about whose they are.

The gate of Jesus helps us this way too. As we enter into the church and its teachings, we participate and learn who Jesus is. As we immerse ourselves in Bible study, we learn to recognize Jesus' voice. We aren't surprised to hear him say things like, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (MT 11:28). Nor are we surprised to hear him telling us to "deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me" (MT 16:24). If we identify as sheep who have gone in and out day after day through Jesus' gate, we definitely aren't the goats (described in Matthew 25) who failed to offer food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, and visits to the sick and imprisoned. Having entered and exited through Jesus' gate over and over again, we sheep know who we are because we know who Jesus is.

2—GATE OF SAFE KEEPING

Besides being the gate of identity, Jesus' gate is also the gate of safe keeping. The gate protected the sheep by keeping them inside the pen. With the gate closed, none of them could wander off. This makes me think of Alzheimer's and dementia wings in nursing homes that sometimes have a secret code on the door. The nursing staff and family members can go in and out

by punching in a four-digit code. But the loved ones with memory problems can't learn and retain those secret numbers, so they are kept safely inside.

Another analogy might be the check-in and check-out policies at daycares and schools. Not just anyone can take a child away from one of these facilities. There are rules and procedures to keep the children safe from those who might steal them away.

Jesus speaks here in John 10 only about human predators, but there could have been wild animals too. Wolves, cougars, and bears might threaten the sheep. But the gated fence was a clear deterrent to any who might harm or steal.

In a spiritual sense, we might correlate those predators to anyone and anything that might steal away the attention of us sheep. Preachers used to accuse other ministers of stealing sheep from their churches. But today the risk of someone switching churches is far outweighed by the likelihood that they will leave church altogether. The allure is more likely to be the secular surroundings and culture. Maybe spiritual attention is displaced by the demands of work, school, and household chores. Maybe time and attention are consumed by entertainment and recreation.

Whatever the predators, Jesus-the-gate intends to keep us safely inside the fold. In part, that's why today after worship, we're having a Safety Sunday presentation. We want you to know how to be as protected as possible when you're at church. In the name of Jesus-the-gate, we want to keep danger out and safety in.

3—THE GATE OF ABUNDANT LIFE

But just because Jesus-the-gate wants us to have a clear Christian identity and to be kept safely inside the fold doesn't mean we're trapped in a tight little framework. Not at all. The gate allows us not only to go in, but also to go out. Following the voice of our trusted shepherd, we sheep go through the gate to find pasture, so that we may have life, and have it abundantly.

Generally, we Christians tend to think of coming to the church to be fed in worship, Sunday school classes, and Christian fellowship. Our spirits are nourished and blessed through singing Christian music and uniting our hearts in prayer. But, as the sheep analogy illustrates, sometimes the food we need is outside the walls of the church. Sometimes we need to follow the voice of our good shepherd who calls us to come out where the pasture is green and the freshwater flows.

We have to be careful not to take any analogy too far. But in John 10, Jesus clearly makes the point that the gate is the way to abundant life. The one who enters by the gate of Jesus will be saved, and whoever comes and goes through the gate of Jesus will be well-nourished.

For our Call to Worship today, we read some verses from Psalm 118. In biblical times, this psalm was sung by the Jewish people as they entered through the gates of the temple in Jerusalem. When it was time for their annual festivals, the people would travel far distances to the temple. Because the temple complex was quite large, there were many different gates. And it was through those gates that they entered into God's sacred place, where they practiced their sacrifices and rituals, where they met up with others to sing and pray and tell the stories of their ancestors. It was through those gates that they could find rabbis and teachers who would discuss, debate, and explain their holy scriptures and teach their Jewish faith.

You may know that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are pretty similar. Each of those three tells about Jesus going up to Jerusalem and the temple at the end of his life. The Gospel of John, which contains all the "I am" statements of Jesus, is different. In John's Gospel, Jesus goes to Jerusalem and cleanses the temple right away in chapter two! Jesus doesn't stay there the entire time, but Jerusalem and its temple festivals are central to the action. Any Jewish person reading these stories in the Gospel of John would know that Jesus and his followers went in and out of the temple gates over and over again.

In that context of spiritual faith and religious practice, Jesus claimed that he was the gate through which his sheep would find good pasture and abundant life. In John's Gospel, Jesus was a miracle worker from God who turned water into wine and a few loaves and fish into a feast for a multitude. He was a learned rabbi who instructed the Pharisee Nicodemus about being born of the Spirit, and Jesus was a thirsty man who invited the Samaritan woman at the well into a life-changing conversation about living water. In John 9, right before this discussion about the sheepfold, Jesus opened the eyes of a blind man and thus opened up new opportunities for him to participate in social, economic, and spiritual abundance. Sometimes we Christians make the mistake of thinking that the only purpose of Jesus-the-gate is to protect us from those who are different. But Jesus-the-gate benefits, serves, and welcomes far more people than just us. For all who come to Jesus, the gate opens up abundant life.

CONCLUSION

As I was searching for hymns for today's service, I found this one:

There is a gate that stands ajar, and through its portals gleaming
a radiance from the cross afar, the Savior's love revealing.
That gate ajar stands free for all who seek through it salvation.
The rich and poor, the great and small, of every tribe and nation.
O depth of mercy, can it be—that gate was left ajar for me?
For me, for me? Was left ajar for me?²

The gate of identity, the gate of safe-keeping, and the gate of abundant life is open for us. Whether we're safe inside the fold, or enjoying the pastures outside, Jesus knows what we sheep need, and he provides it. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the gate."

¹https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/03/13/world/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20240313&instance_id=117480&nl=the-morning®i_id=97788017&segment_id=160629&smid=url-share^te=1&user_id=f3813065d43cab57899115a1f5a42d3#the-israeli-military-allowed-six-un-trucks-to-enter-northern-gaza-directly

²By Lydia Baxter, 1809-1874.