

I AM: The Gate

John 10:1-10 (CSB)

¹ "Truly I tell you, anyone who doesn't enter the sheep pen by the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought all his own outside, he goes ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will never follow a stranger; instead they will run away from him, because they don't know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus gave them this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. ⁷ Jesus said again, "Truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep didn't listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance.

Are we just one religion among a sea of many, that there are many paths to a full and satisfied and abundant life? I mean, all religions are pretty much the same, right? They just have a bunch of lists of things to do and not to do in order to have a happily ever after. Is Christianity any better, any different? Do you even need Christianity for an abundant life?

Last week for Easter, we were comforted as Jesus declared, "I AM the resurrection and the life," (John 11:25), that as God he is life that death cannot overcome, a life that lives in us as he lives in us by faith through a spiritual resurrection. "I AM the resurrection and the life," is just one of 7 "I AM" statements by Jesus that the Apostle John records. These statements fit very nicely into the overriding theme of his Gospel account. He wants all of us to realize that Jesus is not just a man, not just someone with the same purpose as God, not someone who just rose the ranks to become a god, but that he is in fact God, God in flesh, God from all eternity, the one who is, who was, and who is to come. He was there in the beginning. All the world was made through him. He is the very Word of God, the Word made flesh.

During the season of Easter, we will be diving into all 7 "I AM" statements by Jesus. This week, given our extra Bible reading from John 10, you might think that we are going to talk about Jesus as our Good Shepherd. And we will, but not for another 2 weeks. No, in these first ten verses of John chapter 10, Jesus said, "I am the gate," (verse 9a) and "Truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." (verse 7) So, we are going to be talking about sheep, but not so much the Shepherd just yet.

We have to know a few things about sheep to better understand Jesus' word picture. Now, I have never owned sheep. So, I am taking the word of others who have worked with sheep. Apparently, of all the domesticated animals, sheep are the most helpless against predators. They don't have fangs or a mighty bark or camouflage to help protect them. They don't have even some basic survival instincts. If sheep fall into moving water, they will drown instead of swim. If a wolf enters the sheep pen, the sheep will not defend themselves. They won't run away or spread out. Instead, they huddle together, making themselves ripe for the killing.

This is why shepherds in the Middle East build sheep pens out of rocks. Their sheep pens have solid walls. They're hardened, fortified. And there is only one entrance to the sheep pen. Instead of a gate that we would be used to seeing, like some chain link or steel bar gate, the gate is often the shepherd himself. He lays his body down across that one entrance. You have to go through the shepherd to get in or get out. He keeps his sheep safely in the sheep pen.

Now you start to see what Jesus means when he says, "I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." (verse 9) The sheep in this sheep pen are God's Church, his believers. We as God's sheep belong to him in his sheep pen because we have entered through the Gate, through Jesus, through his life, his works, his efforts, his voice. We have entered God's protection through Jesus, the Gate.

We didn't get into his sheep pen by doing a bunch of works, by working really hard at being one of God's sheep. Like sheep being pretty much physically helpless, we came into this world spiritually helpless. We cannot do anything to contribute to our own safety. No, our safety, our salvation, our rescue comes by the Gate, by Jesus. We entered God's sheep pen because he as the Good Shepherd called us by his voice and we entered the sheep pen through him, by the full life of works that Jesus lived for us. Because we have entered through Jesus, the Gate, everything is already accomplished and satisfied that make us a part of God's sheep fold in his sheep pen. Jesus said, "I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance." (verse 10b) As his sheep in his sheep pen, we have a life abundantly and overflowing filled with Jesus' works.

Having entered God's sheep pen, his Church, through the Gate, through Jesus, we are protected. Jesus keeps the sheep, us, in and keeps the predators out. But make no mistake about it. There are thieves and robbers who try to bypass the Gate to get to us. They try to climb in another way with malicious purposes: to steal and kill and destroy Jesus' sheep. They mean to steal and kill and destroy us.

Who are these thieves and robbers? They're the ones who tell you that Jesus is not the only way, the only Gate. They tell you that there are other gates, other openings, for life. They tell you that you have to do all sorts of works and ordinances in order to have a full and abundant life, that such a thing is not handed to you by Jesus, given to you by him, but that you have to work for it. They try to convince you that you have to fill your life with what you can do, with stuff you can get, that this is the true meaning and purpose of life. However, this message of filling our lives with doing things and other stuff that's not Jesus leaves us outside of God's sheep pen, outside of his Church. It leaves us vulnerable to predators and dangers of every kind, to be torn apart by our enemy, that roaring lion, the devil.

We know that the temptation is strong to listen to these voices of the thieves and robbers. If we say that there is only one way to belong to God, only one way to have a full and abundant life, you know that someone will be offended by that statement. They'll take issue with you instead of having the peace and safety that we have. And we'd prefer to avoid confrontation because we are helpless sheep. How can we defend ourselves again the backlash of someone hearing from us that their beliefs, their religion, isn't as good as ours? We don't want to be labeled as intolerant or holier than thou. We aren't ready to answer the person who accuses us, "So you claim to have the monopoly on truth?" We just want peace and protection. We just want a happy life, not an argument.

This is why we need the Gate. We need the protection that only God offers. It's he who makes the exclusive claim to save us. "I AM the Gate," Jesus said. According to him, there is only one way in or out, and it's through him. Only he gives access. Only he can protect us. I AM. There is no other. There is no other full and abundant life other than his life substituted for ours. Any other offer for a full and abundant life, any other proposed gate, is a gate to death and destruction. Because Jesus is God, only he is the Gate through which we have life and have it in abundance. No one else can give us a life in abundance before God, with all works satisfied. Only Jesus has done them all. There is nothing left required by us, not any big laundry list of things we have to do in order to have a full life. Instead, we get to happily live this abundant life given to us through Jesus, life that even death itself cannot overcome. We get to live for him as his sheep, belonging to his Church, having his protection from all enemies – physical and spiritual. We get to live in the joy of knowing that we have his life and are saved from eternal death in hell. This is the peace and protection that we can offer to others. Jesus declared, "I AM the Gate." He said it, but we repeat it so that others can have it too.

As God's sheep being protected in his sheep pen, in his Church, having entered through the life and works of Jesus Christ, the one and only Gate, we listen then only to Jesus' voice. Only he tells us that everything to make us belong to him is accomplished. Only he gives us the message that everything is finished. that only he has accomplished it for us. Only he gives us life in abundance. We ignore anyone else who tells us that there is another gate, another door, some other way to have life in abundance. Our life as God's sheep is only through Jesus. Only Jesus saves. Only Jesus is life. Only Jesus is the Gate to be with God and have life and have it in abundance. Amen.