

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 7, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 10: 1-10)

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

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

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning, I would like you to imagine a door. Just that – a door. You can pick your style and size. Do you have a door?

Now, imagine that that door swings open, and inside is the one thing you most need in this life. Inside is the thing you need that will give your life meaning. Inside is abundant life, wholeness, the thing that makes your soul sing. You may not be able to name what that thing is. But the door opens, and you just know it. There it is. Abundant life is inside that door. The thing you most need in your life is in there. Will you enter? I hope so.

Let’s say you go in, and you find what you need. You find wholeness and healing and abundant life. Joy and companionship. Abundant support and restoration there, absolutely free for you. In there you can rest. In there you don’t have to be worried or afraid. Your shoulders can relax; your hands can unclench. There is enough, and you are enough.

Sit with me for just a moment in that feeling, that wholeness, that peace.

But the door is still there. So the question becomes, would you ever go out again? Would you leave the place of security and abundance? Now that you're in, would you ever go out the door? It would be like leaving that vacation rental in Hawaii, where you spent a week with your family, and life was easy and refreshing and fun. It would be like moving away from home to go to college, where mom isn't there to cook dinner anymore, or listen when you're sad. It would be like leaving the mountaintop, where it's clean and clear and safe.

The door is there. Would you go out the door? Of course, you would. We are humans, and humans are meant to change and grow. We're built to learn and to strive. To stop changing is to die. We get to the point where rest and provision make us feel anxious. Life becomes all the same. There is no meaning. So, we go out the door, from abundant, whole, safe places, and into the new, unknown, brave places.

And what do we find out there? If there is one thing I know for sure, it's that we will find Jesus out there. As surely as we find Jesus in the safe, abundant, supportive places, we will also find Jesus out in the world, with both its beauty and possibility, and its uncertainty and danger.

Jesus says, "*I am the gate,*" which can also be translated, "*I am the door.*" "*Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out to find pasture.*"

If Jesus is a door, then Jesus is an open door, inviting us into a community of care, into the support of prayer or devotion, into times of rest and restoration, into the care of God, who gives us what we need in this world.

If Jesus is a door, Jesus is an open door. We are invited in. And we are invited out. Out into a world where there are temptations to believe that other things will make us whole. Out into a world that threatens to crush those that don't fit some perfect ideal of strong, or beautiful, or acceptable. Out into a world that is challenging yet filled with God's purpose and presence and wonders. Out into the world for the sake of the world.

There is a rhythm to our lives of discipleship. We are invited into times of rest and wholeness, and invited out into the world for our own growth and for the sake of others.

And you may not believe this, but Psalm 23 is based on that rhythm. Psalm 23 that we always go to for comfort and care and being shepherded. But shepherding is both in and out. The Psalm is about coming in and going out. It starts in trust. No matter what happens, this is my shepherd who provides.

*"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall
not be in want."*

It begins in trust, no matter what.

Then it moves into this rhythm of life in God. God invites us into safe places.

*“He makes me lie in green
pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.”*

There are those moments when we experience abundant life and love and rest. You know what that means for you, those moments of refreshment. We love them, and we’re healed by them. By the community or by the family, or by prayer, or music, or being in creation. God invites us into those moments of restoration.

And then God sends us out into places of growth and bravery. *“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”* – even though I am in places of lack or loss, places I might lose myself or the things I need – *“I will fear no evil; for you are with me.”* Even then we can trust.

We cannot control the world. We cannot always see what is right and true. We don’t always know the way to go. But we do know that Jesus is with us, and guides us, and helps us through.

The Psalm goes on. *“You prepare a table before me.”*

What do you find at a table? You find nourishment and community. You will give me what I need in the presence of my enemies, in the presence of evil that surrounds me, the enemies that trip me up, the shadows, the darkness. Even there you provide abundance. *“My cup overflows.”*

Into the peaceful valley, out into the darkness, I shall not be in want. The Psalm is the story of the rhythm of our lives of faith. We are invited into rest and wholeness, and invited out into the world for growth and for the sake of others. Jesus is the door that invites us in and out. The door that we can trust, no matter what.

At the late service today, eight young people are affirming their baptisms. They are not very far along in their journey, but do they hear the voice of God calling them both in and out. They are learning to trust, even if just a little, that God is working in their lives. And because you’re not going to hear them, I would like to read a couple of paragraphs from the faith statements that they will be reading at that service.

One young man finds *“still waters”* of peace and rest on a mountaintop. He writes:

“I am reminded of God’s awesome creation every time I am in the wilderness.

Last summer I was backpacking, and we had just reached the top of a pass, and I turned around and I could see for miles and miles. I saw where I had been, and I remember all of the great things that we had accomplished. I had seen God in my group mates helping each other reach our goals and in the breathtaking nature around us.”

He was called in.

Another was called out. This young woman walked through the valley of the shadow of death, when she lost a close friend to a brain aneurysm, but found God even there. She writes:

“However, as I looked, I realized that God was with me, even in my sadness and anger. I saw God through [her] mom, who stood strong and supported everyone else, even through her own mourning. I saw God reflected through my friends and all our loved ones, who had come together to help each other in grief. At that moment, I realized that Jesus had provided me with everyone I needed to overcome [her] death, and that it was my job to help the others around me. Jesus was still walking with me, guiding me through the hardest time of my life.”

We are called in, and we are called out.

Finally, this young woman speaks of going out, and getting lost, and being called back in through love. She writes:

“I believe God was there with me in times when I needed love, in times when I lost all hope, when I lost my faith. [But] the community that this belief has brought together, the love and support I have received from church, even when I had gone months without attending a single church-related activity, is undeniable. And I think that the love I have been shown played a major part in the securing of my relationship with God. It restored my hope. And I believe that was my nudge, what I needed to bring me back, and light that flame inside me. And I think everyone has those moments.”

Those moments of being called in to be renewed. Those moments of being called out for our sake and the sake of world.

The door is open. And whichever side of the door we are on, Jesus is there.

Amen.