

May 3, 2020
The Kindness of God Is Abundance
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John 10:1-10

Jesus the Good Shepherd

10 “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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Have your Bible phones or Bible Bibles open to John 9 and 10 to stay with me, as I move through the text today. Like most stories, chapter ten makes more sense if you’ve read chapters 1-9, especially chapter nine, in John’s gospel. Because in chapter nine there is an awesome story where Jesus heals a man who had been born blind, and the Jewish leaders are so upset about it, they get into a big argument about whether the man was actually blind in the first place.

So they call in his parents as witnesses, who testify that *yes, he was born blind, but about whether he was healed, you’ll have to ask him about that.* So they do, and the man essentially taunts the Jewish leaders no end, which ticks off the Jewish leaders so they throw him out of the Temple – the irony being, his blindness kept him out because it was thought to be a sign of his sinfulness; but now that he can see, they throw him out for being a liar.

So Jesus goes and find him, asks him if he believes in the Son of Man, and the man born blind says, “Tell me, so I can believe in him.” “You have seen him,” Jesus says, “the one talking to you is him.” To which the man replies, “Lord, I believe.” Friends, check out the wordplay between hearing and seeing. The blind man who has only ever heard, asks to be told. Jesus reminds him he can see. Realizing AGAIN that he can see, he believes.

And then Jesus begins to tell. He tells from verse 39 in chapter 9, all the way to verse 30 of chapter 10. Now his disciples and some Jewish leaders are leaning in to overhear, but it matters to note that Jesus, speaking in our passage today, is talking specifically to a man who has asked to be told who the Son of Man is. A man born blind and healed. A man who has settled for the scraps of this world his whole life, never knowing how very rich he really is. Do you believe in the Christ? "Tell me," the man said. And Jesus did. That's the story we are listening to today.

First, let's pray. *We need you, O God, but then, we reach for everything else instead. If only we could be with you as sheep are with their beloved shepherd, ever listening, ever trusting, ever following as you call, as you lead, as you go, or as you stay. Helping ourselves to the abundance so freely given by your great sacrifice on our behalf. Amen.*

I AM the Good Shepherd, Jesus says, maybe to differentiate himself from that long list of shabby shepherds in Israel's past. Some were downright godawful, and I mean that literally. Remember Ezekiel 34, which I sometimes preach around Thanksgiving? Nobody ever likes it.

*The word of the Lord came to the prophet Ezekiel saying,
prophesy against the shepherds of Israel,
prophesy and say to them, the shepherds,
I will take my beloved flock
from your filthy, lying, corrupt mouths
and I will tend them myself.
But you I will feed with justice.*

The prophecy goes on to promise a new shepherd, David:

*and he shall feed them;
he shall feed them and be their shepherd.
And I, the Lord, will be their God,
and my servant David
shall be prince among them.*

The prince became the king and, while he was better than all the shepherd kings who came before him, David also stole and killed and destroyed sheep, didn't he? Not for God or country, but for the same itchy reasons as the others: greed, gluttony, and lust. He saw something that he wanted, and the voice inside his heart and head told him he should have it.

Bushi Yamato Damashii is a Buddhist Christian whose podcasts and writings I find useful. He comes to mind here in his Buddhist teaching on when to speak. He says that before speaking, the words we say must pass a three-question test: Is it necessary? Is it true? Is it kind? On this, he very much reminds me of the Quaker, John Woolman,

whom we just read in our Lenten reading group. Is it necessary? Is it true? Is it kind? If I pressed all my words through the sieve of these questions, friends, most of the time, I don't even need questions 2 or 3!

So I got to thinking, what would preaching, what would Bible study, what would spiritual life be like, if we pressed our hearing of the word of God through the hermeneutics of these three questions: is it necessary? is it true? is it kind?

IS IT NECESSARY? Today is Good Shepherd Sunday in the Lectionary. Is that necessary? Maybe. How else will we ever get through the 590 hymns about shepherding published in English? And yet, Jesus doesn't even say that in the assigned text for today. Rather, he says, I am *the door*. But unless you are reading from the King James Version, your Bible says "*gate*." But the Greek is "door."

I AM the door of the sheep. Why would Jesus say "door" to a man born blind? Maybe door is the exactly right and necessary word to say to a man who has been shut out of everything meaningful his whole life: shut out of the economy, begging for his daily bread; shut out of his own family (his parents won't even stand up for him in public); shut out of his religious community, twice! Most of all, shut out of the very idea of divine compassion! Jesus' own disciples parrot what they've heard of Jewish law, that his blindness can only be the consequence of sin – his own or his parents'.

That might have been a pretty powerful word, don't you think:

*I AM the door of the sheep,
and if any man enter in,
he shall be saved,
and shall go in and out,
and find pasture.*

Think of that, friends, born broken and living your whole life shut out. Hearing it from everyone who passes by, whatever offering they toss your way reeking more of pity than kindness. Until one day you hear a different voice say about you, *It's not his fault. God is using him for something good*. And half an hour later, you can see. In just enough time to get your hopes up that life might turn out differently, you're tossed out on your own again. Seeing, sure. But as cast out, alone, and marginalized as you were when you were blind.

Question Two: IS IT TRUE? It was *necessary* that Jesus say, I AM THE DOOR. Is it true? What happened when Jesus heard that the man had been tossed out? He went and found him. Became the door he said he was, so that man could walk right back through the promise and into the hope he'd heard an hour before. *If any man enter in, he shall be*

saved. Twice in that same day, Jesus found him and called him. Twice in that same day, Jesus saved him. As many times as it takes.

Jesus said *I am the door*. For our coming and our going. These days there's precious little of it, except for all the crazy places our minds take us. Doesn't matter. Jesus is still the door that we enter to find our way back to him. This passage ties directly to two others in the same Johannine neighborhood. In chapter 20, the disciples behind locked **doors** after Jesus' crucifixion, that word "doors" is the same word translated *gate* in chapter 10 by most English translations. The one who said, I AM THE DOOR is now here among them. And through Him they leave that room in faith and joy.

And in John 14:6, which we will look at next week, Jesus's goodbye discourse around their final supper table, promising they will meet again. Thomas asks, *Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?* And Jesus answers: *"I AM the way – he might as well say, "I am the door" – "I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Friends, don't hear judgment. Hear promise.

Hear the same necessary truth the no-longer-blind man heard when he **SAW** and heard Jesus say *"I AM the door of the sheep, and if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly."* And there is the **kind** word: abundance. The kindness of God is no small thing, friends. The kindness of God is abundance.

Friends, if we could go back in time and interview that man, ask him what he most wanted in the world, what do you suppose he'd say? If he could choose either seeing or feeling like he deserved the space he occupied, the air he breathed and the food he ate, what do you suppose he'd choose? If he could choose either being able to see or earning a living and being respected by his community, what do you suppose he'd choose? If he could choose either seeing or having his parents claiming him and being proud of him in public, what do you suppose he'd choose? How about choosing between seeing and being accepted and useful to his neighbors and his friends? How about between seeing and being part of a faith community where he was welcome to worship God, serve God, and share the goodness of God with the world?

If all Jesus had done for the man was heal his optical vision, that would have been a big deal! But if the man had been asked, he might have said his vision wasn't his greatest need, his deepest longing. And the reality is, Jesus didn't just heal his eyes. Jesus came to give the man what he needed and longed for most. He did for the man, what Jesus does for all of us who believe. Abundance. God's kindness is abundance.

He comes to us, wherever we are, in whatever condition we find ourselves. He. Finds. Us. And he opens the way to that abundance he has prepared for us – eternal life. Life in

him beginning the moment we believe. Ending, never. Changing, ebbing, flowing. Ending, never.

For a sheep, honestly, it's not much. Grass, really. And water. Like the green pastures and still waters of Psalm 23. But everything else is for us. His rod and staff protecting us through the valley of death, the constant mist of goodness and mercy falling over us – sheep don't care about that; that is for us. Jesus didn't just give him sight, he gave him everything: dignity, community, family, intimacy, freedom, faith, and a future.

The kindness of God, given in abundance to those who believe, no matter what brokenness we're born with or told we must bear through this world, no matter the mistakes we've made or the mistakes made against us, the door is long open friends, and calling your name, your own name. Just waiting to pour out the kindness of God upon your life, whenever you are ready to listen.

Let's pray: *Loving Shepherd, calling, guiding, tending us through this world, may we hear your voice through all the others; may we hear our own name; may we hear the belovedness in your voice. Amen.*