

THE SHEPHERD, THE GATE AND THE SHEEP

Isaiah 44:9-20 All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit nothing? People who do that will be put to shame; such craftsmen are only human beings. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and shame. The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is used as fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me! You are my god!" They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"

Psalms 4 Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer. How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods. Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him. Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the LORD. Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.

Romans 8:28-39 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding

for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 10:1-15 "Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go 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 to the full. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

MESSAGE:

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus uses two different analogies to describe his relationship with his disciples. First, he says, he is like a shepherd, his disciples are like a flock of sheep and the kingdom of God is like their sheepfold, where they can find rest and safety. Then Jesus says that in addition to being the shepherd who will lead his flock to the sheepfold; he is also the gate through which his sheep pass to enter the sheepfold. As there is only one gate into a sheepfold, there is only one way to enter the kingdom of God, and that is through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the way into the kingdom of God.

I'd like to consider these two images of Jesus with you this morning because I think they can help us better understand how our relationship with him can help shape and form our Christian lives. Listen to the first part of the gospel again: "therefore, Jesus said again, 'I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go 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 to the full.'"

The science fiction author, Robert Heinlein, once wrote a novel entitled *The Day Into Summer*. Heinlein had a pet cat who, like most cats, hated winter weather. He and his wife and cat lived in Colorado where there were cold winters and a lot of snow. Every

winter his cat would go to the door and meow to be let out, but when Heinlein would open the door and let his cat see the snow, the cat walk away in disgust. But he wouldn't quit there. He would go on to every door in the house that led outside and meow until it was opened so that he could see that there was snow outside. Heinlein couldn't understand why the cat kept doing this until one day his wife suggested that maybe the cat was hoping that one of the doors would lead to summer weather. He says he threw up his hands and said "eureka! That will be the title of my next novel."

There are a lot of people are who like Heinlein's cat: They keep knocking at one door after another, trying this and trying that and trying something else, but nothing leads them to where they want to be. To all such people Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep: whoever enters through me will be saved." When we place ourselves in Jesus' hands, we have come home to the sheepfold. With Jesus, we are safe and we can find rest. He is our way, our truth and our life. Jesus is the door into summer.

But Jesus also says, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...". So Jesus is not only the gate to the sheepfold, he is the good shepherd who leads us to the gate. In Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, *Alice In Wonderland*, Alice dreams that she finds herself in a strange land where she encounters fantastic creatures like the March Hare and the Mad Hatter and the Queen of Hearts.

One of the creatures she encounters is the Cheshire Cat, whom Alice finds sitting in a tree where the path she is following diverges into three different paths that lead in three different directions. She asks the cat, "which path do you think I should take?" The cat answers, "where are you trying to get to?" "I'm not sure," Alice says. "Then any path will do quite nicely," says the cat.

A lot of people are like Alice. They ask people they meet along the way—their boss, a good friend—maybe even a member of their own family: "what do you think I should do in life? What path do you think I should choose?" People say, "this path" or "that path" or "maybe you should try them all." So you take someone's advice and start out down a path they suggested.

Now there's one thing you can be sure of about paths, and that is that they all lead somewhere. Another thing you can count on is that once you've started down a path, you'll be inclined to stick to it. Even if you have misgivings, going back seems harder than plodding ahead and besides, you don't like to admit you've made a mistake. And there will be signs along the path that indicate that you're headed for a good place. I have yet to see a road sign that says, "five miles to Centerville: a lousy place to live."

One of your advisers may have suggested a path that will make you rich; another a path that will lead to pleasure, and another a path that will enable you to become you smarter than everyone else. But they're only promises; they have no power to deliver what they promise. And the sad fact is that they often deliver the opposite of what they promise.

The pursuit of money for its own sake usually only leads to the craving for more and more money. How many people have you known who thought they had enough money? The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake can lead to intellectual pride, the conviction that you know more than anyone else. It can also lead to resentment over the fact that nobody is impressed with how much you do know. As the bible says, "knowledge puffeth up." The

one who pursues pleasure for its own sake ends up becoming addicted to whatever pleasure he pursues—accompanied by less and less of an ability to enjoy it. The fornicator burns with lust yet finds himself impotent. The drunk tries to escape his guilt and misery by drinking even more. The drug addict needs more and stronger drugs to achieve the same high until he overdoses and kills himself.

By themselves, neither money nor pleasure nor knowledge can keep you safe and give you peace. On the contrary, they can be paths to destruction. So it's important that you go to the right person when you're looking for advice about what path to take in life. And the only person who can give you infallible advice about what path to take is the Good Shepherd. All the rest are false shepherds who have come only to steal and kill and destroy. Jesus alone is our only reliable guide.

And this is the Gospel: the *good news* that we have a savior who will lead us into eternal life. It is the message that Jesus commissioned all who follow him to carry out to the rest of mankind. But it is not only the rest of mankind who need to hear this gospel: we believers need to hear it as well—and we need to hear it again and again.

There are a lot of Christians who understand the basics of their faith: they know that Jesus is their Lord and Savior, that they are justified by faith in him and that they have eternal life. But they have worries and doubts about how they're living their Christian life *right now*. They struggle with sins that have dogged them for decades and wonder if God is going to continue to put up with their sinning. They have the nagging sense that there is something more they ought to be doing that they're not doing.

Do I pray enough? Do I repent enough of my sins? (I've known a lot of Christians who are trying to repent their way to heaven.) Am I grateful enough to God for what he's done for me? Am I doing as many good deeds as I should?

We have these niggling doubts because there's a part of us that just doesn't *completely* buy into the idea that we are saved by God's grace and God's grace alone. Part of us keeps thinking that there must be something we have to add to what Jesus has done. As one theologically astute member of our congregation has put it: God has given it to us but we keep wanting to earn it. After all, doesn't the Bible say, "the Lord helps those who help themselves?" Well, no, as a matter of fact the Bible doesn't say that. What the bible *does* say is that we are saved by grace through faith--***not of works lest any man should boast***. We read it, we know it's true, but we'd still rather do something to pay our own way.

What that really means is that deep down, we don't believe that Jesus is enough. He may have done everything necessary to save us, but he still needs help from us. He may be the way, the truth and the life, but we need to add our two cents worth because as everyone knows, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Tanstaff! Whenever we start telling ourselves this we need to remember the words Jesus speaks to us today: "I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved." They also need to remember that he says, "all who ever came before me were thieves and robbers."

There are a lot of people out there peddling a lot of other "gospels" and they all promise a better way to enter the sheepfold than through Jesus alone. I think of them as "Jesus-

plus-something” peddlers. They always add something to the Gospel. “Sure we’re saved by faith in Jesus Christ but we also need to ...(you fill in the blank).”

For some it’s faith **plus** works. That’s what the church of Rome, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Anglican Church teach. For some it’s faith **plus** speaking in tongues. That’s what charismatic churches teach. For some it’s faith **plus** living a holy life. That’s what the monks teach.

For some it’s “trust **and** obey.” I saw a sign by the road once that read: “want to be saved? 1) “confess your sins; 2) ask God to forgive them; 3) trust in Jesus Christ; and, 4) **obey his word.**” The last statement basically nullified the first three statements. They all sound reasonable and they’re all wrong.

When Jesus was asked, “what must we do to do the works God requires?” [he] answered very simply, “**the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.**” Plain and clear from the mouth of the Lord. We are justified, made righteous before God by his forgiveness of our sins which we receive through faith in Jesus Christ, not by anything we do or can do. Standing in this faith, we can be absolutely sure of heaven.

Listen to Paul’s words in Romans: “and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son....and those he predestined he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

This has been called “the golden chain of salvation” by which believers live and die. It’s the most simple and the most wonderful message in the world. We know it’s true because God said it and God cannot lie.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd and Jesus is the gate. There is no other shepherd and there is no other gate. When you have Jesus, you have everything you need.

Amen.