

Psalm 23

John 10:1-18

May 3, 2020

Fourth Sunday of Easter/Shepherd Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SHEPHERD GATE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Saturday, June 17, 1972, five men were arrested as they burglarized the offices of the Democratic National Committee. The offices were located on the sixth floor of a complex called “The Watergate.” Just over two years later, on Thursday, August 8, 1974, Richard Nixon resigned as President of the United States. Part of the fall-out from that political scandal was the attachment of “-gate” to just about any- and everything suspicious since.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter’s younger brother registered as an agent of the Libyan government. When it was revealed that the president’s brother had received hundreds of thousands of dollars, and questions of influence peddling began to be raised, the president had a mess on his hands in the midst of a heated presidential campaign. The name of the scandal? “Billygate”

Later that same year, at the end of October, not long before the presidential election, President Jimmy Carter and Candidate Ronald Reagan appeared together for the only time in a debate. There was a short-lived controversy when it was discovered that the Reagan campaign had somehow acquired the president’s briefing papers ahead of time. The name of the scandal? “Debategate”

In January 1998, President Bill Clinton testified and denied having an inappropriate relationship with a White House intern two years earlier. In December of that same year, President Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives but acquitted by the Senate. The name of the scandal? “Monicagate”

These “gates” aren’t reserved just for politics or the United States. On Valentine’s Day 2013, an inspector for Quebec’s Office of the French Language sent a warning letter to the owner of an upscale restaurant. He ordered the owner to stop using Italian words such as calamari and antipasti, and use French words in their place. Instead, the owner went public, the government agency was embarrassed, and the director of the OQLF resigned three weeks later. The name of the scandal? “Pastagate”

Just a couple more. On January 18, 2015 the New England Patriots and the Indianapolis Colts played for the American Football Conference Championship. The Patriots won 45-7. Their victory was overshadowed by charges that quarterback Tom Brady had ordered the footballs to be underinflated (actually, the Colts had complained ahead of the game, but nothing was done). After investigations, Tom Brady was handed a four-game suspension and the Patriots paid a \$1 million fine and lost two draft choices. The name of the scandal? “Deflategate”

Finally, in December 2016, as her nation hotly debated the complex issue of Brexit, British Prime Minister Teresa May agreed to an interview and photo shoot in her home with *The Sunday Times Magazine*. She wore a pair of “desert khaki” pants that apparently cost around \$1,250. Her political opponents, even some in her own

Labor Party, criticized her fashion choice in a time of hardship for many. The name of the scandal? “Trousergate”

Well, that was certainly the introduction! You might be wondering why in the world I spent so much time talking about “-gate scandals” on the fourth Sunday of Easter, traditionally designated as Good Shepherd Sunday. What could possibly be scandalous about the Good Shepherd who makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside still waters, restores my soul, leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake, walks through the valley of the shadow of death with me, prepares a table before me, anoints my head with oil, knows me by name, gives life abundantly, and lays down his life for me?

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “Jesus told people that their sins were forgiven. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin.” Lewis explains, “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’”

The problem, Lewis wrote, is “That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

If you think C.S. Lewis is too harsh in his expectation of how we should think of Jesus, consider the reaction to Jesus saying things such as “I am the gate for the sheep . . . Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (John 10:7,9) and “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11) At the end of this story that brings so much comfort and echoes so much the beloved 23rd Psalm, John tells us exactly how the people reacted to what Jesus said: “Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?’ Others were saying, ‘These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’” (John 10:19-21)

The designated gospel reading for this Good Shepherd Sunday ends at John 10:10, before we hear Jesus say “I am the good shepherd.” Somehow “Gate Sunday” just doesn’t have the same ring to it! However, once you expand the reading to include verses 11-18, where we **do hear** Jesus say, “I am the good shepherd,” the question could be raised, “So, which is he – the gate for the sheep or the good shepherd?”

Some commentators encourage us preachers not to wade into that dilemma, and stick with one description or the other in a single sermon. But that sets up a false dichotomy. Jesus isn’t **either** “the gate for the sheep” **or** “the good shepherd.” He’s both . . . and so much more. Since Jesus wasn’t actually an opening in an earthen sheepfold out in the country or an actual shepherd who took care of animals in the fields, we don’t have to decide for one or the other. The important characteristic the gate and the good shepherd share is loving care for the sheep. And, as Psalm 95:7

reminds us, “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.”

I don’t know much about sheep and shepherds other than what I’ve read in books, learned from hearing about Jean Parks’ son Spencer raising sheep, and watching our three homegrown shepherds in David Johnson’s Advent plays. Just the same, if you’re like me, there is a lot of comfort to be found in Jesus being the gate and the good shepherd.

When Nancy and I were in seminary, an exchange student was studying biblical languages and taking Bible courses as he trained to be a Bible translator for his home country. One day in class, the professor called on him to share his perspective on difficulties in translating the Bible from one language to another. The student used the 23rd Psalm as his example. I remember him telling us, “In my country, we have no sheep and, therefore, no shepherds. So, ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ would not have much meaning for my people.” He continued, “But we have lots of ducks and the people who take care of the ducks are called ‘duckmen.’” You can see it coming, can’t you? He told us, “A good and meaningful translation of the 23rd Psalm for my people would be ‘The Lord is my duckman.’” We all chuckled with him, but he made the good point, that a good duckman, just like the good shepherd, seeks out good food and clean water and shelter and safety for his beloved animals.

If we find such comfort in hearing “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” and “I am the good shepherd,” why in the world would I start this sermon with example after example of “-gate scandals” and call the sermon “Shepherd Gate”? What am I implying?

Well, if we are content to focus only on the comforting words about the gate and the good shepherd (which are surely there), we will ignore the wider context of the meaning of this story in John’s gospel for our life. Jesus talking about being the gate for the sheep and the good shepherd is a continuation of a running debate with the Jewish religious leaders that goes back to the beginning of chapter 9, when Jesus heals a man who was blind from birth.

As the religious leaders press the once blind man about who healed him, they give voice to their suspicions, their defensiveness, and their rejection of the one who will call himself “the gate for the sheep” and “the good shepherd.” They say things such as “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath” (Jn 9:16) and “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner” (Jn 9:24) and “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” (Jn 9:28-29) For the religious authorities, then, Jesus is a scandal – a “shepherd gate” if you will.

As you know, I often quote Frederick Buechner, as he has a unique way of expressing deep truths of the faith. He lives in southwestern Vermont, on Rupert Mountain, near the town of Dorset, where my cousins have their family home. Rev. Buechner preached on the 23rd Psalm at the 200th anniversary of the Congregational Church in Rupert, Vermont. In his sermon, he said, “‘God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world,’ Robert Browning wrote, and the psalm is certainly not saying that any more than you or I can say it either. Whoever wrote it had walked through the valley of the shadow the way one way or another you and I have walked there too. He says so

himself. He believed that God was in his Heaven despite the fact that he knew as well as we do that all was far from right with the world. And he believed that God was like a shepherd.”¹

If we believe that Jesus is like our good shepherd and the gate, we will also have to deal with the scandal of the “shepherd gate.” In other words, along with Jesus’ comforting words “I am the gate and the good shepherd,” he brings a claim upon our whole lives. The religious authorities of Jesus’ day could not even accept him as a great moral teacher, as C.S. Lewis wrote. They shut him up as a fool, they spit at him and killed him as a demon.

And Jesus makes the same claim upon your life and mine still today. “I am the gate for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd . . . I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?” As Lewis wrote, as the “shepherd gate” Jesus has not left open to us the option of thinking of Jesus just as a good moral teacher or, for that matter, just a source of comfort whenever we get around to calling on him. Instead, to say we believe Jesus is the gate for the sheep and the good shepherd, and really mean it, is to “fall at his feet and call him Lord and God” and, I would add, live as it we really mean it.

Part of the “scandal” of the “shepherd gate” is that what Jesus offers us runs so counter to everything the world offers us as a way of dealing with the harsh realities of life. We hear the Good Shepherd’s voice calling our name, but we hear his voice in life situations which all too often are dry and dusty rather than green and lush, full of fear and sorrow rather than assurance and joy. When we hear the Good Shepherd’s voice, our circumstances might tempt us to echo the religious authorities and say, “We don’t know where this man comes from.”

But, if we are able to hear our names when the Good Shepherd calls us and follow him because we know his voice, surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life and we will have life and have it abundantly.

I recently introduced you to the poetry of Rev. Andrew King, who writes poems based on the weekly lectionary text. Let me end today’s sermon with his Poem for the Sunday Lectionary (Easter 4) called “Pasture.”

There is a place we can find, a good place
like quiet meadows where flowers spread,
like green grasses by gentle streams;
a place where the heart feels nourished,
where the mind is hopeful, unhurried,
where the spirit is glad and at peace.
We’ll name this place fulfillment,
we’ll name it healing and thankfulness,
we’ll name this good place *pasture*
for there we seek to feed.
And there is a voice we can hear that calls us,
a gentle voice, melodious,
a voice like songbirds and laughter,
like a mother comforting her children,
like a shepherd calling his sheep.

We'll name this voice acceptance,
we'll name it mercy and forgiveness,
we'll name it the voice of God's love,
inviting us gently to feed.

It invites us to enter pasture
when we think we're too hurting to listen,
too angry or grieving or fearful
to hear the voice that calls us to peace.

It invites us to enter pasture
when we're sure we're too busy to listen,
too burdened or worried or pressured
to hear the voice that calls us to peace.

It says: Come in and go out and find pasture.
It says: We are safe with the shepherd of all sheep.
It says: Meadows await us, in this moment.
It says: Rest in love. Where you are. Joyfully feed.²

Let us pray: O Lord, our Shepherding God, come close to us now. Come near us in our time of need. Shepherding God, you guide us with your voice. Help us to listen and follow no matter where your voice leads. Help us to trust you. O Loving Shepherd, we have all we need, as we live in you. Good Shepherd, teach us to follow you and to be faithful to the calling you gave us to be shepherds in your name. Amen.

NOTES

¹ Frederick Buechner, "Like a Shepherd," found at www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day.

²Andrew King, "Poem for the Sunday Lectionary (Easter 4), "Pasture" (John 10:1-10) at www.earth2earth.wordpress.com/2014/05/04/poem-for-the-sunday-lectionary-easter-4/