

Fourth Sunday of Easter

I AM THE GATE

John 10:1-10

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

1"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."

Introductory Note: "I am the gate" (vs. 7 and 9) is a lesser known saying of Jesus, unlike the other metaphors he uses in John's gospel and the book of Revelations, more familiar, e.g. "I am the light of the world" (8:12; 9:5), "I am the bread of life" (6:35), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "I am the true vine" (15:1), "I am the way, and the truth, and the

life"(14:6), "I am the Alpha and Omega" (Rev. 1:8), even, "I am the good shepherd" (10:11). Nevertheless, by all of these sayings Jesus identifies himself with the name of God spoken to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14), likewise, his self-affirmation, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" (Ex. 8:58). In this lesson we see God in Jesus who identifies himself as the gate of a sheep pen, which swings both ways.

DIAGNOSIS: Locked In, Locked Out

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Illusion of Privacy*

In Florida, where I live, there are numerous gated communities that come at a high price, publicized as private kingdoms with an atmosphere of comfort and safety, complete with gatekeepers and electronic surveillance. Free of harassment, noise, and the undesirables "out there," we easily succumb to the illusion of being secure in our own castle. Why, even sheep feel "right at home," surrounded by a secure pen and a shepherd that will look after our every need. No invasion from the outside world, no thieves, robbers, or bandits to disturb our peace and quiet! The sheep we are, we think we've got it made!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Illusion of Control*

At the same time we have a nagging sense of insecurity. Needing to feel safe, avoid threats, and escape danger, we live in fear. To manage that fear we find ourselves scrambling to get a grip, to ward off the enemy, to build walls we can trust, to withdraw into ourselves, into our make-believe world, depending on our powers to control in order to survive and succeed. Actually, in warding off the enemy from without, we become thieves ourselves, wanting "to steal a place for ourselves" in an unsafe world,

“climbing in by another way” (v. 1), a self-defeating illusion as well.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Illusion of Safety*

However, trusting in ourselves to be secure, to keep everything under control, even able to hold the thieves and robbers at bay, we find sooner or later that we do not have absolute power, not over life, not over death, and for a certain, not over God. There is no way that we can wall God into our little schemes, keeping God to ourselves, our magic puppet, as God then remains on the outside, always a threat to our vaunted sense of security. Having shut God out, believing that we can “go it alone,” we become vulnerable to “the thief in the night,” (1 Thess. 5:2), ultimately, the transcendent God who is able to “kill and destroy” (v. 10), which only increases our dread, as we find ourselves locked in hell.

PROGNOSIS: Going In, Going Out

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Vision of Mercy*

Paradoxically, the same God from whom we attempt to hide, whose presence would otherwise terrify and consume us, invades our space as a Merciful Shepherd, entering our pitiful pen in order to claim us as his own. Precisely when the disciples of Jesus, a scattered flock, locked in and locked out, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, appears with the sign of mercy. “Peace be with you” (John 20:19, 26), he says. John describes this awesome scene, the disciples in hiding, estranged from their Lord and God, in hell, as Jesus enters, having been there in his crucifixion, abandoned himself, now raised from the dead to heal them and us, breaking into our sin and death in order to break us out. Here is the Good Shepherd, having gone “ahead” (v. 4), now gathering his flock, the sheep and the Shepherd united, God’s mercy open

forever.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Vision of Security*

So, who else is there, ultimately, to follow than the One through whom we are now free to approach God whatever the ins and outs of life, knowing that we are on solid, safe ground, secure in God's promises? By faith and trust we go with Jesus, who says, "I am the Gate, the entrance to your safety and your security, your eternal life. I am the Gate, legitimate, trustworthy, and faithful. I am the Gate, to welcome, to receive, to love, and to care." Peter had it right when he responded to Jesus, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Who is Jesus without his sheep? Who are the sheep without Jesus? We walk through the gate with him, following the One who calls us "by name" (v. 3) as the baptized, going "in and out, finding pasture" (v. 9), as those who feed at his Table, getting what he has, becoming what he is, faithful shepherds ourselves.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Vision of Community*

In the end, we were not meant to be sheep living a pent-up, walled-in existence, luxuriating in isolation. Alas, we have become a shepherding community. As a seminarian I was called to serve a congregation that told me up front that "they were a little flock and they wanted to stay that way." Really, is that not a temptation for every congregation? To be sure, we have been gathered by our Lord for more than that, for nothing less than to be a community that reaches out, as Jesus commands, to his "other sheep" (John 10:16), to those locked in/locked out, without access to a communal life in Jesus, the least of his sisters and brothers, the black sheep, the outcasts, the nobodies, the wandering lost who are without a shepherd and a caring community. Indeed, if our Lord is the Gate to the Father,

the way that leads to eternal pastures, then we who follow him, the church, are called to be an open community that exists for no other purpose than to be a gate by which people may come and go, freely sharing God's gifts, being God's people, so that "there will be one flock, one shepherd" (10:16).