

John 10:1-10, Psalm 23
Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020
Preached on line during the COVID-19 Quarantine
Pastor Karen Boda

Our gospel text today is from the gospel of John, chapter 10, beginning at the first verse.

John 10:1-10

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

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

Word of God, word of Life. Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I’m Pastor Karen Boda, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregational Life. I bring you greetings today from Bishop Kevin Strickland and all the staff of the Southeastern Synod. We pray that you are well on this Fourth Sunday of Easter.

During this time when we’ve all been sheltering in place, our daughter has done the grocery shopping for my elderly in-laws. Each week, the list has contained many of the same items: milk, bananas, chicken salad, honey buns, toilet paper, and Lysol.

Each week my daughter picks up the milk, bananas, and chicken salad. For some reason there was a run on Little Debbie Honey Buns, but they seem to be back in stock now. Toilet paper and Lysol? Each week she looks. Each week the shelves are empty. Each week, she returns empty handed. Three months ago, who would have guessed that Little Debbie honey buns, toilet paper and Lysol would be in demand. The people who make Lysol certainly didn’t.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal¹ describes how Gabe has worked on the production line at the Lysol factory in New Jersey for the past 24 years. This factory has now converted to

¹ Michael M. Phillips, “Lysol Factory Job Becomes a Calling,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-workers-at-a-lysol-plant-have-a-mission-now-11587482618>.

100% Lysol production. No more *Easy Off Oven Cleaner*. No more *Easy On Spray Starch*. Only Lysol. It is a job for Gabe. Six days a week it is a job. Twelve hours a day it is a job. Each and every day it is a job.

Exhausted, Gabe came home from work one night and was greeted by his daughter in the driveway. She'd been watching the evening news and ran out to tell him that he was literally helping to save the entire world. She told him that he was on the front lines of this battle against the COVID-19 virus and she was proud of him!" Gabe stopped in his tracks and his eyes were suddenly opened. For the first time in decades, Gabe sees that he's got more than a job. Gabe understands the importance of what he's doing and his whole outlook on life has been changed.

Today our gospel of John posits the imagery of Jesus as a gate and as a shepherd. Our psalm is the beautiful 23rd psalm which begins "the Lord is my shepherd...". We love this image of Jesus as a good shepherd, perhaps with a staff in his hand, in the midst of serene landscape with lush green fields and surrounded by gentle sheep. It's a beautiful image, and truth be told, it helps many of us get through the tough times. In the last words of our gospel text, Jesus tells us that he came as a shepherd so that we may have life, and have it abundantly.

Life. Abundant life. Can it get much better than that?

Unfortunately, we often get drawn into thinking of abundant life as things - consumer goods or services. If I have the right house or attend the right school or shop at the right store or enjoy the right wine or drive the right truck, then my life will be abundant. In these crazy virus times, abundant life may even be described as a pantry full of honey buns, Lysol and toilet paper! Social media and TV constantly remind us that without these things, life isn't enough.

But this isn't the abundant life that Jesus the shepherd describes.

The gospel of John lays out abundant life for us in the series of I AM statements. I AM the bread. I AM the light. I AM the resurrection. I AM the vine, the way, and the truth. These, these are the descriptors of abundant life! These. These are enough!

Today, in Jesus' role as the shepherd, he says I AM the gate. To really appreciate this I AM statement, it's helpful to consider the context and how in John, Jesus tells a story of a sign or miracle, they talk about it, then Jesus interprets it.

Our text "I AM the gate" is the interpretation of the story of the blind man. This man was a beggar, unable to sustain work and support himself. The people couldn't figure out why he was blind, either. Had he sinned? Or was it his parents who had sinned? No matter who sinned, this man was shunned. Isolated. So Jesus spat into the dust, made a paste and rubbed it on the blind man's eyes. Jesus told this man to go wash. The man washed....and he saw.

The man's sight was restored, but this man also experienced so very much more. This man was no longer in fear of those who would take advantage of him - a blind man who couldn't see the danger coming. No longer forced to beg, he could now provide for himself and his family. He

was welcomed back into the community, those who he loved and those who loved him. Most importantly, this man's eyes have been opened to see the presence of God in Jesus. He knows who Jesus is.

Theologian Karoline Lewis claims that abundant life for this blind man was protection, provision, and presence, not just for today, but forever.²

Protection.
Provision.
Presence.

As we hunker down in our individual homes, venturing out only when we have to and only when safely masked, missing our communities and our activities, waving at our family through windows or from across the street, perhaps even having to drop off our loved ones for a medical procedure, these three words really resonate with us today.

Protection.
Provision.
Presence.

Jesus speaks to us in our isolation too: I AM the gate. No matter how many wolves or dangers are outside, no how many viruses, Jesus says I will bring you through the gate into my green pastures. My rod and my staff will protect and comfort you. When our own jobs are at risk, our sleep hampered by the thought of paying that next bill, by the helplessness of watching our friends lose work and identity, Jesus tells us that he will provide for us. Jesus tells us that in our darkest night, in our deepest valley, when we are sheltered in alone, I am with you. Not just today. I am with you always. Jesus says, I came that you may have life; and have it abundantly.

Remember the Lysol company? Back in 1918 when the Spanish flu rolled across the planet, one of their ads in the *New York Times* advised "Fight Spanish Influenza with Daily Disinfection – use Lysol daily to kill germs!" That as was way back in 1918. They knew who they were. The company had a mission to save the world then, too. They had a purpose way beyond helping us clean our toilets once a week. Gabe had been blinded by his job on the factory floor, day after day, overwhelmed by the load that he carried. Until his daughter opened his eyes.

We too forget. We too get buried in our isolation, in our fear, and in our busyness. We too forget that we have been given. the love and acceptance and grace of a God who wants us to live life, and live it abundantly. We too forget that we have been washed clean by the waters of baptism so that we can embrace this abundant life and the relationship Jesus offer us. We too need to be reminded of who and whose we are.

May our eyes be opened to know that our shepherd, Jesus Christ, will always be there to open the gate to protect us, provide for us, and most importantly, to be present with us. Amen.

² Karoline Lewis, "Commentary on John 10:1-10," Working Preacher, Luther Seminary, May 11, 2014, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4873>.