The Gospel of John: The Shepherd-Door 
John 10:1-21

Last Sunday we began our journey through John 10 where Jesus, in vss. 1-5, uses a “figure of speech” or a parable featuring thieves, shepherds, and sheep. He is speaking to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, but we learn in vs. 6 that his listeners “did not understand what he was saying to them.” This morning, then, we will dig into how Jesus explains the parable. So, as we return to John 10, let us once again read the whole thought unit, John 10:1-21.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7 So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and 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. 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.” 19 There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. 20 Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?” 21 Others said, “These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Shepherd-Door of the Sheep; 2) the Door That Saves; and 3) the Door to Freedom.

I. The Shepherd-Door of the Sheep

As I mentioned earlier, the parable of the Shepherd and His Sheep that Jesus taught in vss. 1-5 causes some degree of confusion amongst his Jewish listeners. It’s not that what Jesus said about sheep, shepherds, and thieves is unclear…it’s just unclear as to what Jesus is trying to say through the parable as it pertains to the Jewish listeners and/or Jesus Himself. So, in vss. 7-18, Jesus unpacks His own parable.

Within the scope of His teaching on this parable, I hope you noticed that Jesus makes two “I am” claims about Himself. Did you catch what they were? Jesus says twice, “I am the door,” and then Jesus says twice, “I am the good shepherd,” right?

Both of those statements are loaded with meaning, and we will take time to look at them independently. However, here’s the problem I first ran into when I read this text many years ago: why would Jesus say, “I am the door” and then immediately say “I am the good shepherd?” In other words, if the parable serves as an allegory, then I get it when Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd.” That makes perfect sense, right? Jesus is the Shepherd, who lovingly leads and cares for His “sheep,” those people who hear His voice and follow Him…that would be people like us, the Church. However, why would Jesus point to this allegorical parable and say, “I am
both the door, and the good shepherd,”? After all, the door is an inanimate structure...as opposed to the personal, relational role of the good shepherd, right? Wrong! In fact, if you are imagining Jesus referring to Himself as a wooden door of some kind, you have missed the point here altogether. Please allow me to explain.

If you recall, last Sunday we learned that there were two kinds of sheepfolds in the ancient world: there was the communal, collective sheepfold in town, and then there was the makeshift sheepfold out in the wild. The parable that Jesus taught in vss. 1-5 generally assumed the communal, collective sheepfold that actually had a wooden door of some kind that was protected and controlled by the “gatekeeper.” Remember that the gatekeeper would only open the door for the shepherd, and thus anyone who tried to get into the sheepfold by another way was clearly a thief or a robber.

Now, however, when Jesus says, “I am the door of the sheep” in vs. 8, He is actually conjuring up the second kind of sheepfold, and all of the Jewish listeners would have known this immediately. Why?

Let me tell you a quick story. The famous Old Testament scholar, Sir George Adam Smith, tells of a time when he was travelling in the middle eastern countryside with a guide and came across a shepherd and his sheep. He fell into a conversation with him. The man showed him the makeshift fold into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls with a way in. Sir George said to him, “That is where they go at night?” “Yes,” said the shepherd, “and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe.” “But there is no door,” observed Sir George. “I am the door,” said the shepherd. The shepherd was not a Christian man, he was not speaking in the language of the New Testament. He was speaking from the Arab shepherd’s standpoint. Sir George looked at him and said, “What do you mean you are the door?” The shepherd said, “When the light has gone, and all the sheep are inside, I lie in the open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door.” K. Hughes, *John* p. 271.

Now listen once again to what Jesus says about Himself in our text this morning: I am the door of the sheep...I am the good Shepherd...I lay my life down for the sheep. Can you see the picture now? In the ancient world it was a well-known fact that good shepherds, when alone with their sheep in the wild, laid across their make-shift sheepfold as the door, leveraging their bodies and their very lives to keep the sheep safe inside, and to keep the wolves outside. The good shepherd...the loving shepherd...was one who was willing to lay down his life to be the door of the sheep!

Again, the first-century listeners would have understood this imagery immediately; so, with this picture in mind, let us once again listen to what Jesus says in vss. 7-9: Truly, truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door.

So what is Jesus saying here? First of all, notice the contrast between Jesus—the true Shepherd-Door—versus those who “came before” him who were thieves and robbers. We get the sense there can only be One Door...one True Shepherd...and that is Jesus. Any other who might make such a claim is a thief...an imposter. Now, who is Jesus talking about here in vs. 8? Who were those who came before Jesus? We can’t know for sure. Perhaps Jesus is referring to the condemned “shepherds of Israel,” that God so harshly condemned in Ezekiel 34 as we read last
week. These were men who were charged to serve as “under-shepherds” of God’s flock, but they abandoned their posts, fed themselves instead of the sheep, and ruled over the flock harshly.

There is also the possibility that Jesus may be referring to any number of imposters who claimed to be a messiah prior to Jesus…and there were more than a few of them. The false messiahs tried to summon the allegiance of “God’s flock” for selfish and political gain, but “the sheep did not listen to them.” Why? Because those imposters were not The Door. They were not good shepherds who were willing to lay down their lives for the sheep. According to Jesus, there is only one Door; there is only one Good Shepherd, and the sheep will hear His voice and follow Him and Him alone.

By the way, there are still many thieves and robbers who would promise us the moon…promise to take care of us…promise us all kinds of green pastures if only we would subscribe, pay our dues, join their team, wear their uniforms…but Church, listen to Jesus: there is only ONE DOOR, ONE SHEPHERD—the rest are thieves and robbers.

II. The Door That Saves

Jesus states in vs. 9, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved…” Church, think long and hard about what Jesus just said…this statement is loaded with meaning. However, to grasp the meaning, we must remember and acknowledge a biblical worldview as we discussed it last week. We must recall and appreciate that, according to a biblical worldview, “We all like sheep have gone astray, each turning to his own way” as we read in Isaiah 53:6.

Lost sheep need saving, right? Why? Because lost sheep are defenseless, vulnerable and incapable of saving themselves. Lost sheep will become dinner for any number of predators; or lost sheep will starve to death from a lack of available food. Lost sheep are dead sheep unless they find their way back to the fold; back to the loving care of the Good Shepherd who lays at the entrance of the fold as the self-sacrificing Door. And here’s what Jesus just said to all the lost sheep in the world: “I am the Door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved…”

Now, let’s be honest: if Jesus is just a good man…if Jesus is just one good teacher among many teachers all throughout human history…if Jesus is just a prophet like many other prophets…his claim to be THE DOOR that saves is both arrogant and foolish. No mere mortal can claim, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” without being rightly diagnosed as a delusional psycho. If Jesus is just a mere mortal, he could only be suggesting that his teaching is so good that if anyone agrees with his teaching, he would be “saved.” But does teaching save people? Teaching informs and equips people, but teaching alone cannot save a condemned soul, right? Jesus is making a claim here that no other religious leader, no other philosopher, no other historical figure ever thought to make: “I am the Door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved…”

Some of you might argue: “OK, but aren’t there other doors as well? Isn’t it arrogant or naïve or ignorant to assume there is only ONE DOOR through which lost sheep can be saved? Isn’t this claim of Christianity exceptionally narrow and exclusive to all other claims made by competing religions and philosophies?” That is a good question: and yes…it is true that the DOOR that
saves is narrow according to a biblical worldview. Jesus says so himself in Matthew 7:13-14, “3 “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

In a pluralistic society with a humanistic worldview, any claim that is narrow or exclusive seems to be rude, exclusionary, and thus must be wrong. However, I would appeal to the imagery our Lord has given us: that of the sheep, the sheepfold, and the Shepherd.

If you are a vulnerable sheep seeking refuge from the wolves that would destroy you, do you want a really wide gate in your sheepfold, or a very narrow gate? Now, a wide gate sounds great at first blush. Lots of sheep can go in and out together whenever they like. There is no bottleneck, no having to deal with the Shepherd who would inspect each and every animal as they squeezed through the narrow gate, looking for injuries or issues that might threaten the sheep’s health or well-being. Wide gates are easy, and we like easy. But here’s the problem: wide gates lead to destruction. Why? Because wide gates have no DOOR…no loving Shepherd who personally attends to the sheep, no loving Shepherd who lays down his life to protect the sheep from the wolves. Sheep and wolves alike can enter through the wide gate. Listen Church: once a few wolves get into the sheepfold, the sheepfold is no longer a place of safety…it is an arena of death, right?

So, if you are a lost and vulnerable sheep, you want to enter through a narrow gate, right? One that a good shepherd can easily lay across with no gaps. You want a Door…a Living Door who lays down His life to keep the sheep safe inside and keep the wolves at bay.

Jesus is the Door because He is the Shepherd. According to a biblical worldview, there are not many doors and many shepherds…there is just Jesus. As Jesus states of Himself in John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.”

Now…the Door does not just provide salvation from wolves and starvation. The Door also provides freedom.

III. The Door to Freedom

Listen again to what Jesus says in vss. 9-10, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to kill, steal, and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Church, when I say the word, “freedom,” what comes to your minds? For most people, the word freedom means “to cast off all restraints.” For most teenagers, freedom means summertime with no classes, tests, or papers due. For college students, freedom means no more nagging parents telling them what to do! For many people in our society, freedom means being able to do whatever we want, with whomever we want, whenever we want! But these ideas of freedom are based upon a humanistic worldview; a worldview that places human happiness, pleasure, and enjoyment at the center of all things. It is a worldview where humans are the highest developed organisms who occupy the top of the food chain.
However, when we consider a biblical worldview, a worldview that assumes that human beings are sheep who have gone astray who are in need of saving, freedom takes on a whole new meaning, right? For sheep, freedom requires the constant presence of a Good Shepherd. Freedom means being able to go in and out without the concern of being ripped to pieces by wolves.

So, in contrast to a secular worldview that might see freedom as a “shepherd-less” society where people can come and go and do as they please with no accountability; a biblical worldview sees freedom as that which can come only through the constant presence, care, and protection of the Shepherd…the One who lays His life down as the Door!

And this is precisely what Jesus presents to His sheep: anyone who enters through the Door (who is Jesus) will be saved, and he will go in and out and find “pasture.” This pasture is the abundant life! And the abundant life is the freedom to go in and out, all the time knowing that your Shepherd is with you, has gone before you, and is strong enough to defend you against all that would destroy you. The abundant life is made possible through the constant presence of the Good Shepherd.

Church, can you see Him? Can you see the Door? Can you see Him laying across the threshold, bidding us to come in through the narrow gate…to come in through Him, so that, for the rest of our lives, we will be able to come in and go out as part of His flock…safe and secure in the constant presence of the Good Shepherd?

We will pick up here next week, but for the moment, I want to reflect on how powerful and appropriate this text is for our culture in this moment.

Rarely, if ever, in my 50 years of life have I known or experienced the measure of fear and anxiety as that which I observe in our church and culture right now. Even given that every election season is volatile, this hour in history seems different. I suspect it is because, for the first time maybe ever, Americans suspect that the changes we see happening all around us are irreversible. After seven months of Corona-land with no end in sight, it is increasingly difficult to imagine a time when we will once again crowd into a room and sing at the top of our lungs. Given the unprecedented hostility between the left and the right, it is increasingly difficult to imagine that we might ever again enjoy civility in the public square. Given the deep division that is constantly exploited between the haves and have-nots, people of different races, and people with different values systems, it seems increasingly difficult to imagine a time when we will find more in common as opposed to those things that divide us. For the first time in history we are literally facing a potential restructuring of America’s “operating system,” from that of capitalism to that of socialism. Popular science tells us that global warming will soon wipe us out; economists warn that the stock market is doomed to crash; and our nation’s “enemies” are stronger and better armed than ever before.

There is no shortage of bad news in the world today; and let’s face it…we are all exhausted. This exhaustion, along with isolation, pessimism, and anxiety are the perfect recipe for hopelessness; and hopelessness will destroy the human soul. We all need a fresh, heaping helping of hope, amen?
Here is the hope: it is the abundant life that Jesus promised His sheep. Now, in a season of loss, we are quick to point out all of the “abundant pastures” that we feel are being threatened or taken away from us. We lament; we fear; we get angry because we have so often identified the “abundant life” of the gospel with our “way of life.”

Church, the abundant life of the gospel is not “our way of life.” The “abundant life” promised to us in John 10 is a life in the constant presence of our Shepherd…period. In His presence, we are saved! In His presence, no wolf may enter the fold. In His presence, we have all the pasture we need. And yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death…we will fear no evil. Why? Because the Shepherd is with us; His rod and His staff—His presence; they comfort us.

Our Shepherd continues to prepare a feast for us in the presence of our enemies…have you noticed? It is that which we celebrate every Sunday…it is the Lord’s Supper. Our Shepherd continues to anoint our heads with oil—we are adopted, we are His beloved, His bride, and He adores His Church. And if you are paying attention…if you have eyes to see--our cup continues to overflow with the grace and loving kindness of our Shepherd, amen? Nothing can take away the grace of the gospel that we received when we entered through the Door and experienced the salvation of our souls through the forgiveness of sin. If we know Jesus…if we have ever experienced His grace…then our cup overflows…that is a given, regardless of the social issues or the outcome of any election.

No matter how bad things get, keep your eyes on the Shepherd, and practice the gospel. Apply the Gospel as you engage with one another. Apply the gospel as you post on social media. Apply the gospel as you vote in November. Apply the gospel in your conversations in your small groups and in your Be The Bridge groups. Apply the gospel in your marriage and in your parenting. The Shepherd has given us exactly what we need in this hour of history…He has given us…Himself.

Church, don’t believe a lie. Don’t accept a different gospel. We are sheep, and we have a Good Shepherd. Hear the words of your Shepherd: Jesus said, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” Enter through the Door, be saved…and be free.

Let us pray.