

Last week was the third week in a row where we had the resurrected Jesus visit his disciples. We are still in the season Easter, a season of the resurrection but today we have a long and complicated metaphor whose focus seems to be about relationship. It's all about relationship- God's relationship with us.

In ten verses of packed metaphor, John gives us sheep, a sheepfold, a shepherd, a gate, a gatekeeper, a pasture, a sneaky band of thieves and bandits. There is a lot here.

A few things struck me today: what is a gate? What is abundant life and what threatens it- steals from it? And and Hearing the voice of the Good shepherd ,with us as sheep.

Underlying these things is the foundation of Relationships. [PAUSE] Its all about relationship!

So lets look at belonging and believing. At first glance, Jesus's reply might appear to suggest that belonging to him depends on believing in him.

But in fact, what Jesus says is exactly the opposite: you struggle to believe because you don't consent to belong. In other words, belief doesn't come first. Belonging does. Belong, Jesus says.

Consent to belong and Belief will follow. Behave in ways that has you belonging and belief will follow. Contrary to common belief its our behaviour that shapes our beliefs

To "believe" in the Gospel sense means to trust, to lean on, to depend on. It's an orientation of the heart.

I'll believe it when I see it – should probably be modified slightly but significantly: I'll believe it when I do it.

Believing and following according to Jesus and today's psychology go together.

By the way more often than not we are not looking for proof of God's existence, but like Thomas its the experience of God's presence we are looking for.

“I am the gate.” Jesus says of himself.

Not, “I am the wall, the barrier, the enclosure, the dividing line.” Not, “I am that which separates, isolates, segregate.”

So what is a gate? A door. An opening, passageway. The start of freedom. And what if Jesus is a different kind of gate? A gate that opens out instead of closing in? An invitation to enter into safety and belonging? A gate that leads to abundant life.

“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

What is being pictured here is a large sheepfold capable of accommodating several flocks. The gatekeeper recognizes the shepherd and opens the gate for him. The shepherd would use a distinctive call to call his sheep, and they would recognize his call and gather around him. “He calls his own sheep by name” This reflects the personal nature of the relationship between shepherd and sheep.

In that culture, people considered a person's name to be more than a simple label to identify that person. They believed that something of the person's identity was tied up in the name—that the name expressed something of the person's essential character.

The point of this verse is that the good shepherd knows the sheep with the same kind of intimacy that we have with our closest friends and loved ones.

“If anyone enters in by me, they will be saved.” That is the purpose of the sheepfold—a safe haven in a dangerous world. It protects sheep from thieves and predators and saves them from their own foolishness. Lets face it we have all had moments of foolishness in our lives that have been less than helpful. [PAUSE]

What do we need protection from—are thieves who come only to steal kill and destroy Thieves focus only on satisfying their needs, regardless of the cost to others others.

The Pharisees are one example of thieves and bandits, but there are many others.

Whatever and whoever keeps you from the full abundance of life is a thief. And we all have different thieves: for some watching news steals your life it robs you of peace and replaces it with fear. For others it might be endless distractions.

Several years back there was a saying on the mouths of many Christians WWJD? And If we want to experience life at its fullest, we will ask, WWJD?

WWJD stands for “What would Jesus do?”

What would Jesus have me to do? How can I be more faithful to Jesus? How can I be more like Jesus? Will, he blesses us with abundant life. Abundant life by the way does not necessarily mean health or wealth. It means abundance that has more to do with what is in our hearts than with what is in our hands.

And regardless of what we do, though, we eventually come face-to-face with the reality that the world is still wild and unsafe, that there are still questions without answers, that there are still thieves and bandits in the world bent on destruction.

That doesn't make Jesus promise to bring us abundant life if we hear his voice and void. Abundant life is not a life free of problems and concerns.

What it does mean is that we have to change our understanding of abundant life. I remind you that it's all about relationship

But what about those who don't "hear Jesus' voice?" Does this mean they don't belong? No it doesn't. Seeing faith as a loving, trusting relationship, as something you have to enter into and experience, is an open invitation, not an exclusion. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Come in, try it out, taste and see that the Lord is Good happy are those who trust in him."

Using a metaphor of stained-glass windows: From the outside they aren't much to look at; you have to come inside and visit in order to see the beauty and experience it.

Thinking of faith in this way, then, doesn't exclude so much as prioritize first-hand experience, relationship, and participation.

We know that voice—not because we were instructed to, but because, over time, we have come to trust it and recognize it.

**J**esus' words speak a deep human experience: "The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name." This is not a picture of control, but of relationship. Not command, but recognition. Not exclusion but inclusion- including sheep from other folds!

But if we are honest, recognizing that voice today feels harder than ever. Our world filled with sound. News bitws, click bait, alert pings on our phones. Social opinion after opinion, often urgent, often distracting and conflicting.

There are voices telling us what to fear,  
what to desire, what to believe,

Voices that are not of Jesus are  
voices that generate fear, division, or  
despair; Systems that reduce people to  
numbers. Voices that tell us we are not  
enough, or that others are less worthy.  
The voice of truth is quieter. It carries a  
different weight because of what it does.  
It is a voice that is consistent with acts of  
care, patience, and consistency.  
A voice whose authority that comes from  
being present with us. The voice of Jesus

offers something different: “I came that  
they may have life, and have it  
abundantly.”

So this week I invite you to listen  
deeply to the voices are grabbing your  
attention- identify them. Do you hear a  
voice that leads not to fear or  
diminishment, but to life? Because that  
voice, however quiet- calls for hard  
listening- is the one that calls you by  
name. I invite you listen intently this week.