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The Living Christ Opens the Gate of the Good Shepherd's Fold

In Bible times, the picture of the shepherd was as common as the picture of the farmer is today, and so God's caring love was often compared to the task of the shepherd. Shepherds are not as common today, but Christians love the Bible's descriptions of the Good Shepherd. In today's Gospel, Jesus introduces himself as the Good Shepherd by calling himself the gate of the sheep. He says, "Whoever enters through me will be saved." Only the shepherds who enter the church through Christ can shepherd the sheep and only those who follow the Good Shepherd will gain his love and guidance.

Sermon John 10:1-10

Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Introduction – We live in a digital age, don't we. Once upon a time we called people on the phone or we sent something in the mail or we went to the store. These days we use the internet. I know some of you aren't into the internet but most of us are. You almost have to be these days. So we buy stuff from Amazon and we get the news from JSoonline and we make doctor appointments with Livewell. People don't have addresses or phone numbers anymore; they have websites. To get to a website you need a password. Trouble is if you type in the wrong password or spell it wrong, you get a nasty message: "We're sorry, we are not able to access this account. Please check your password." Seems like you can't get anywhere in these digital days without a password.

I don't mean to tell a silly story to talk about something really important but the words Jesus spoke in today's Gospel kind of make the same point. The Gospel for today is from John chapter 10 where Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd. For centuries John chapter 10 has been the focus of attention of the Fourth Sunday of Easter. We even call this Sunday Good Shepherd Sunday. There are words and thoughts in John 10 that we have learned to love: **I know my sheep; I lay down my life for the sheep; I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.**

What's interesting about the first ten verses of John chapter 10—the Gospel for today—is that Jesus doesn't really talk too much about what the Good Shepherd does. Instead, he talks about what the sheep do. He doesn't talk so much about what the Good Shepherd gives the sheep but about how the **sheep gain access** to the Good Shepherd. In other sections of John 10 Jesus talks about the sheep as they leave the sheepfold; here he talks about how the sheep get into the sheepfold.

We live in a society where people are pretty sure there are all kinds of ways to get in good with God. When it comes to religion, people are more accepting than they used to be. It's not politically correct to talk about exclusivity as though some people have it right and other people have it wrong. Exclusivity may not be politically correct, but it's exactly the point Jesus is making today. There is only one way to God. So what do the sheep do in this situation? How do they react? Jesus has the answer in today's Gospel.

The Shepherd's Sheep Trust the Shepherd

They know his voice

They follow his lead

1. It was October, six months before Good Friday. Jesus was in Jerusalem and he knew the plots to kill him were taking form. A lot of people were interested in hearing him but the church leaders were in his face at every move he made. What really set the Pharisees off was a miracle Jesus performed on the Sabbath Day: he healed a man who had been blind since birth. Jesus faded into the crowd so the Pharisees took out their rage on the blind man. They grilled him and insulted him and finally threw him out of the synagogue. Right about then Jesus reappeared. And this is what he said: **Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.**

Jesus was painting a picture and his point was pretty obvious. In the picture, the sheep in the sheep pen were believers, God's people. Anyone who was going to take care of God's people, anyone who would be the shepherd, had to take care of the sheep and lead the sheep God's way. **The one who enters by the gate**—that's God's way—**is the shepherd of the sheep.** God's way was absolutely not what the Pharisees were doing. God's way was not to pile man-made rules on the backs of people which is exactly what the Pharisees did. God's way was not to demand that people obey those rules to get right with God but that's exactly what the Pharisees did. God's way was to offer forgiveness to sinners which was exactly what the Pharisees didn't do. God wanted Israel's spiritual leaders to point the sheep to the Messiah but the Pharisees refused to listen to the Messiah and threw the blind man out of the synagogue because he did. Jesus called them out for what they were. You insist that you are the shepherds of God's people, but you are nothing but thieves and thugs and robbers and rapists. You are destroying the sheep and stealing their treasures.

What Jesus said to the Pharisees back then he's also saying to a lot of churches and church leaders today. When it comes to God's way to save, Jesus isn't willing to be accepting and he isn't interested in being politically correct. Truth about God is truth and lies about God are lies. Truth saves us. Lies destroy us and eventually damn us. It is not true that the Bible contains errors, not true that good deeds get us to heaven, not true that babies don't need baptism, not true that we receive only bread and wine in Holy Communion, not true that God would never condemn anyone and not true that God wants only Americans to be saved. I'm not going to make a list but the truth is that churches and church leaders right here in this city teach all those lies and they teach them in other cities, too. Jesus calls them thieves and robbers. He calls their sheep victims and casualties and fatalities.

The true shepherds? The shepherds that lead the sheep the way God wants them led. **The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.**

The shepherd's sheep trust their shepherd and they know his voice. Really, our life with God depends on knowing the shepherd's voice. We need him to lead us in our walk through life and we want him to call us by name. That's why we hear his voice and search his scriptures again and again. We need to know his Word and his teachings well enough that when we hear something from a friend or on Christian radio or see something in a magazine or a religious TV show, we can say, "That doesn't sound right. That doesn't sound like something my shepherd or my pastor would tell me." The thieves and the robbers can be coy and convincing; they can look good and sound good. They are experts in half-truths and heresies. The truth is that they have bamboozled countless people, maybe even some of your family and friends. Don't let them bamboozle you—and they won't if you know the Good Shepherd's voice and you know it well.

2. The Pharisees were pretty sure that were leading the people the way God wanted them to. John tells us that the Pharisees didn't understand what Jesus was telling them. It was like, "So what's the point here, Jesus?" Jesus had an answer. "God's way, the way God wants you to lead his people, is by pointing them to me." **Very truly I tell you, Jesus said, I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.**

Out there where we live there are too many gates to God to count. There are gates named Mohammed and Buddha and Joseph Smith and Frances. They invite us with power and pomp but there's no safety and no salvation inside. There are gates named money and lust and science and prejudice. They promise us thrills and delights and attract us with flashing lights and fireworks. Once inside we find ourselves in the dark about God.

There is only one way to access the goodness and grace of God and that one way is Jesus. When we come to God through Jesus, we find what we need. Against one fence in God's sheep fold we find his law which alerts us to the reality of sin and the threat of hell. On another fence we see Jesus' love which led him to take our sins on himself and free us from the sins we commit. We look around the sheep fold and we see the power of Jesus that keeps us safe from Satan's temptations and inspires us to love one another. And finally, on the last fence, we see the promise of Jesus to stand near us when we die, to carry our souls to heaven, to raise our bodies from our graves, and to live with us forever. When we enter God's fold and God's family through Christ the Gate we find Christ the Shepherd, the Good Shepherd who leads us in the paths of righteousness forever. And that's why **The shepherd's sheep trust the shepherd and follow his lead.**

Jesus is the only password that allows us to access the place where God wants us to be. Don't ignore it, don't misspell it, don't forget it. J E S U S. Type that and you will be online forever. Believe that and you will be with God forever. Amen.