

Sermon – John 10:1-10
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
4 Easter – Year A
30 April 2023

“All We Like Sheep”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I can pinpoint the exact moment I realized I would never win any Father of the Year awards. We were living still in South Carolina, the parents of two young children. It was a Saturday, a sunny day, quite lovely outside. But we were inside, enjoying a quiet morning. So, we were somewhat surprised to hear our doorbell ring. We lived on a fairly sleepy cul-de-sac and did not often have unexpected visitors at our door. I opened the door to see two people, one tall and one small. “Doesn’t he live here?” the adult, a neighbor from the next block, asked, pointing down at little Anders. I was overcome with gratitude and not a little bit of embarrassment, seeing our not-quite-two-year-old Anders returned to us. We hadn’t known until he was found and returned to us that he’d been lost. Not lost for long or gone too far, but still. Somehow, he’d found his way through an unlocked door and wandered off, astray.
2. As people, we don’t much like closed, much less locked, doors. We view them as constraints on the freedom we imagine we can handle. When life goes in a direction we wish it hadn’t, we speak of closed doors and look for new ones opening. When one door closes, and all that. But aren’t doors sometimes shut

- and even locked for our benefit? Surely, I wish we would have had our hatches battened more securely that day long ago. I will be forever grateful to the neighbor who found and returned our child, but I also wish he'd never had the chance to wander off.
3. Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year over the three-year lectionary cycle, we hear a section John 10, in which Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd. But in the opening ten verses, he doesn't get around to saying, "I am the Good Shepherd." What he does say today is, "I am the gate." It doesn't quite have the same ring to it; while Good Shepherd Lutheran churches exist in abundance, I've never seen a Gate Lutheran Church. But there is power and promise in this "I Am" declaration. Do we not live in a world of thieves and bandits? Do we not stray, lost, among the forces of sin and evil and death? While we create so many false barriers between ourselves, do we not need a strong barrier to pen us in and keep us safe from all that would harm us?
 4. After letting the sheep out from the fold to find pasture, a shepherd in Jesus' time would bring them back at the end of the day to find rest. The shepherd would need his rest, too, of course. But he could not let down his guard. So, the shepherd would lie down across the opening into the pen, making his own body to be a barrier between the sheep and all that might seek to harm them during the night. He would lie down, quite literally willing to lay down his life to protect that sheep within his care. We wander lost in the valley of the shadow of death, but Christ, our Good Shepherd, leads us home. Brings us daily into his verdant green pastures, sets us a feast for us, and then lies down across the opening. He lays down his life, his cross barring the door against the thieves and bandits wish us ill.
 5. In last week's cantata service, Pastor Ben Stewart spoke of how one aspect of salvation is spaciousness. To be saved, that is, has a geographic result. To be

saved is to be brought out of our narrow, closed in, finite lives of scarcity, and brought instead into a new place, a place of unending horizons, wide open spaces, and an abundance of life beyond our imagining. We are safe here because of the gate, this Jesus who marks the threshold between death and life, this One whose death gives us life. Because Jesus lays down his life we can live freely. The door has been locked to sin and death, and we who have heard Jesus' voice are locked in safely.

6. This past New Year's Eve, Lutheran pastor and professor Jim Nestingen died. Jim taught my Lutheran Confessions course in seminary and was always keen to remind us of two things. First, we were all sinners. But second, that Christ died for sinners. As I shared a few weeks ago with our Cornerstones group, Jim shared with us that when, as a pastor, he was at the bedside of someone who was dying, he would whisper in their ears, "The next voice you're going to hear belongs to Jesus." And what joy that will be for us! We have learned to hear and know the voice of the One who loves us unlike any other; the One who speaks to us in scripture and sermon and prayer; the Host who each week sets a meal for us in the midst of life's troubles as a foretaste of the feast to come; the One who walks through the locked door of our fear and becomes for us the door now shut against sin and death. Yes, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We've walked through it as a congregation more than I've cared to of late. But we have not walked through the valley alone. The Shepherd is with us. His voice speaks to us, calling and comforting. And we, hearing and following, shall dwell safely in his Father's house forever.
7. We, on our own, are strays. Sheep wandering lost among forces we cannot control. On our own, we can't find our way home. But we no longer need to, for we are not on our own. Christ, the very Son of God, has moved into our neighborhood. He finds us, taking us by the hand or throwing us over his shoulder, and brings us home. He who laid down his life in the great chasm of

death has healed us by his wounds. In his resurrection is our life, abundant and eternal, now and forever. Listen to his voice, whispering in your ear, "I love you, and you are mine." Listen, and know that he will keep you safe forever. Listen, and know that you will one day see him face to face. Listen, and follow his call into the wide-open abundance that is life with the Shepherd who is good. No matter how far you've wandered, no matter how long you've been gone. Jesus, the gate and Good Shepherd, will find you and bring you home. When he brings you to that final door, he will say to his Father, "Yes, this child once lost is one of ours. She lives here and will forever." Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.

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