

I AM THE GATE

SHERARD EDINGTON

John 10:1-10

Jesus is walking down the road accompanied by his disciples when they encounter a blind man. This man had been blind all of his life. He was born blind. Jesus spits on the ground and rolls up a ball of mud he makes with his spit. He wipes the mud on the eyes of the blind man. Jesus then instructs the man to go and wash off in the Pool of Siloam. The man does this and for the first time in his life he is able to see. He has sight. When the man returns to his neighborhood the people are confused. They know the blind man as a beggar, but now he can see. Or maybe it isn't the blind man at all but simply someone who looks like him. The man, himself, keeps insisting, "Hey, it's me." The people want to know, "How did this happen?" He tells them, "The man called Jesus did it." "Where is he?" "I don't know."

The Pharisees are called in to investigate this strange situation. "Who did this?" they ask. "Jesus—a prophet." Then the Pharisees insist that by definition, "Jesus can't be a prophet because he healed on the Sabbath. That makes him a sinner."

The Pharisees don't believe the man's story, so they call in his parents. His parents confirm that their son had been blind from birth. The Pharisees interrogate the man a second time. He says to them, *I have told you already, and you would not listen*. The man then confesses that Jesus is *of God*. The Pharisees become angry and *they drove him out*. They cast him from the synagogue because he will not deny Jesus. He becomes an outsider. Jesus locates the man and the man exclaims, *Lord, I believe*.

The Pharisees are present for this so Jesus turns to them and tells them a parable. This is our passage for today. Technically, it is not a parable, it is a metaphor—two metaphors actually. One scholar describes this passage as "a richly layered, extended metaphor that speaks of sheep, shepherd, gate, gatekeeper, stranger, thieves, bandits, and wolves." (We won't get to the wolves today.) Jesus employs all these images to describe to the Pharisees who he is, who they are, and who we are in relation to him.

The first thing Jesus tells the Pharisees is who he is not. He is not a thief or a bandit. Jesus asks the Pharisees to imagine a sheepfold—a paddock, an enclosed area where sheep are kept at night. A sheepfold has a gate to allow the sheep ingress and egress each day. Anyone who enters the sheepfold any way other than the gate is by definition *a thief and a bandit*. Honest people use the gate; those with nefarious intentions sneak in over the back wall. The shepherd, for example, uses the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd. The sheep hear the voice

of the shepherd and those that belong to the shepherd follow him out. The shepherd goes ahead *and the sheep follow him because they know his voice*. The sheep, Jesus says, will not follow a stranger.

That is the first metaphor Jesus offers the Pharisees—about the shepherd and the sheepfold and the thieves and bandits. But clearly, the Pharisees don't get what he is talking about, so he gives them a second metaphor. This one is a little more direct. *I am the gate*, Jesus tells them. *Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. Those who came before me are thieves and bandits. The sheep did not listen to them.* Jesus continues saying, *I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

We can look at this passage and say, Jesus is a gate, I get it. But we have to remember that he says all of this in the context of the story of the blind man. In his blindness, the man was unable to lead a full life. He is forced to beg in order to survive. He lives at the fringes. Jesus heals the man and makes him whole but the Pharisees refuse to allow him back in. They *drove him out* because his healing was not authorized by them. They are the controlling power in their land.

Through these metaphors, Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of being the thieves and the bandits. They are the ones stealing life from the sheep. They are the ones climbing over the back wall into the sheepfold. They are not the true shepherds of the people. Jesus brings life; the Pharisees are stealing life. The people hear and follow the voice of the true shepherd. When Jesus tells the blind man to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam, the man obeys. He follows Jesus' voice even though he has not seen him. Jesus calls his own. When the Pharisees called in the parents of the blind man, they confirmed that yes, he had always been blind. But they say little else because *they were afraid of the Jews*. Even when healed by Jesus, the Pharisees steal life from the formerly blind man.

Jesus is the gate for the sheep. Those who had come before him were the thieves and bandits. They came to *steal and kill and destroy*. Jesus brings life, abundant life. As the gate to the sheepfold, Jesus is the true way to salvation. Salvation does not skulk over the back wall. The gate is not there to exclude; the gate is there to protect.

I am the gate is one of several occasions in John's gospel where Jesus uses this 'I Am' formula. Through the season of Lent and on to Easter I will be preaching sermons on each of these sayings. Last week we looked at Jesus saying, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness*. We see this come to life in Jesus' healing of the blind man. That man never needs walk in darkness again. Jesus brings light. Next week, for communion Sunday, we will look at Jesus' statement, *I am the bread of life*.

As we approach Easter, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of who Jesus is. Do we view Jesus as a talented rabbi who got cross-ways with the authorities? Or, as something more? When the blind man was asked who did this to him, his first response was, *A man called Jesus*. Later, he called Jesus *a prophet*. Finally, he confesses that Jesus is *from God*. How do we see Jesus? As a man, a prophet, or the Christ sent from God?

As the gate, Jesus protects and nourishes his flock. The blind man represents the blindness of the people of Israel. The Pharisees—as religious leaders—are supposed to be the shepherds of Israel. But they are more concerned with preserving their power and authority than ensuring the well-being of their people. They are the thieves who *steal and destroy and kill*. They stole life from the blind man, hindering him from living life to its fullest. Throughout John's gospel, Jesus' message is about life. We read passages such as: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life* (3:16). *In him was life, and the life was the light of all people* (1:4).

This life that we read about in John's gospel is not just about life after death. It is life for us as we live on this earth, as we go about our daily existence. The abundant life that Jesus offers is life in a community that knows its shepherd, that knows that its shepherd is Christ, sent by God. It is this life that is abundant in worth and relationship and love. It is being able to differentiate between the voices of those who use us for their own gain and the voice of the one willing to sacrifice himself for his flock.

Amen.