

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
4th Sunday of Easter, Year A
May 7, 2017
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca
Text: John 10:1-10

What image would you use to describe Jesus? How would you portray character, personality, and mission of our Lord with symbol or metaphor? The Gospel of John contains many images of Jesus. He is the giver of living water, he is the bread of life and the light of the world. Water. Bread. Light. All of these things sustain life. They portray Jesus as the one who comes that we might have life and have it in abundance. Today we hear two more images, Jesus the good shepherd and Jesus the gate for the sheep.

This day in our church calendar is sometimes called Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus as Good Shepherd is one of the most beloved images of Jesus. And for good reason. The Good Shepherd cares for the sheep, leads the sheep and will leave the 99 to find the one who is lost. The Good Shepherd will even lay down his life for the sheep. The Gate for the Sheep does not get as much attention, and the term 'gatekeeper' can be problematic, especially when applied to Jesus. We like to think of Jesus as welcoming everyone and ministering to all. This image of Jesus as gatekeeper, keeping some people out of the fold may be puzzling, and worse, it has been interpreted in ways that vilify those of other faiths. So what does it mean that Jesus is the gate for the sheep?

First, a little context. The Gospel of John was written around 100 AD, some 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The community of John lived in tension with the established religious authorities. These disciples were trying to be true to the words and teachings of Jesus in the midst of competing claims as to what it means to live a good and moral life. For many in the first century, living a good life meant that one was faithful to the tradition, culture and religion of one's ancestors, no matter what. For the Roman occupiers, a good life was found in obeying the Empire and worshipping the Emperor. And traders and travelers that passed through the region would add their voices to the mix, buy my goods, worship my idols, follow me and you will be a success!

We too, are bombarded with competing voices; all making claims for what it means to be human and the purpose of our lives. From our loved ones, neighbors and coworkers to media outlets, corporations, and politicians we hear many different points of view. Some would have us believe that it is all relative. That there is no such thing as truth; one opinion is just as valid as another. Even amongst those who say they are Christian, we hear competing world views and theologies. How then can we follow Jesus, the one who said I am the way, the truth and the life? What voices can we trust?

Listen again from this morning's gospel, "The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them. He goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." Shepherds protect their sheep mainly by seeing that they do not wander off. In Jesus'

day, sheep would be rounded up at night and kept in a rough enclosure of rocks and bramble, with the shepherd sleeping across the opening.

We can allow the voice of Jesus to be the gateway to our hearts, a way of filtering out what is harmful, and allowing through that which is good, and true, and noble. We can listen for the voice of Jesus amongst all the views and opinions that vie for our attention and seek to influence us.

When we are weighing a decision, can we hear the voice of Jesus saying.... "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you." And then we can ask ourselves, Would Jesus approve our decision?

When we listen to a proposed plan of action, can we hear the voice of Jesus saying... "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me." And we can ask ourselves, Would Jesus condone this plan of action?

Businesses around the country are claiming that their Christian faith allows them to discriminate against people of other faiths or who are lesbian, gay or transgender. A funeral home in Mississippi refused to pick up the body of a man who had previously made arrangements with them. Why? Because they found out that he was gay and married to his partner of 52 years. In their grief, the family had to scramble to find another place for his cremation. The nearest they could find was 90 miles away. I don't hear the voice of Jesus in the way this family was treated.

When someone tells me that we should only take care of our own, that others who are poor or sick or differ from us do not deserve care and respect, I don't hear the voice of Jesus.

The images of Jesus as Good Shepherd and the Gate for the Sheepfold deal directly with the existence of greed, heartlessness, and evil in the world. The wolf, enemies, and the thief represent those that pose harm to those who are vulnerable. We can identify their danger if we listen for Jesus' voice. If you cannot imagine Jesus saying something, beware! You may be listening instead to a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He lifted up those on the margins. He healed those who were considered outcasts and sinners and finally laid down his life to expose the injustice, evil and violence in the world.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, our good shepherd. Protect us from evil. Help us to hear your voice amidst the confusing and competing claims for our attention and devotion. Inspire us to protect the vulnerable in your name. Amen.