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Psalm 23; **John 10:1-15**

THE 'I AM' STATEMENTS: I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD;  
I AM THE GATE FOR THE SHEEP

We are continuing our examination this summer of the I AM statements Jesus makes in the Gospel of John. Already, we've heard Jesus declare, "I am the light of the world." And then we heard Jesus state, "I am the bread of life." Each of these metaphors tells us something about Jesus, about who he is and how he functions in our lives.

In today's reading, Jesus uses yet another metaphor to describe himself. But it can seem a bit confusing. At first Jesus states that he is the Gate for the sheep. But then later he declares that he is the Good Shepherd of the sheep. At one point Jesus speaks about bandits and thieves who try to enter the sheepfold by climbing over the wall but then later he describes them as coming to the gate and calling to the sheep, but the sheep do not recognize their voices and do not heed them.

Rather than getting bogged down in these inconsistencies, we would do better to look at what is the underlying message of this passage. What we learn is that the sheep are vulnerable to a whole variety of dangers. But that Jesus, as either the Good Shepherd or the Gate, serves to protect and guide the flock.

Of course, in this metaphor, we are the sheep. We are those vulnerable sheep, those defenseless creatures that thieves seek to steal or manipulate for personal gain. We are easy targets for exploitation by so many forces in life--both external as well as internal forces. Just look at how the release of a new iPhone will have folks running to the store to line up in order to be the first to purchase it. The market place knows how to exploit our inner desires and

cravings--as well as our fears and insecurities. And so we amass money to ensure our security, and we distrust people not like ourselves, and we build walls and put bars on our windows to keep out others, and we chase success and wealth to feel good about ourselves. There are all kinds of voices that approach the sheepfold and try to steal our peace of mind, or instill fears and prejudices, or stifle generosity, or coax us to find happiness in material possessions, or plant within us feelings of dissatisfaction or messages of our inadequacies.

And these voices don't necessarily come in sinister or evil forms. They sometimes just look and sound like the prevailing culture. Sometimes they might even come in forms we think of as righteous and holy--like religious communities. We can see how most of the world's great religions--Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism-- have at some time or another had their very faith stolen by those within their tradition who preach and practice messages of hate, greed, and murder. Within our own Christian tradition, there are voices that distort the Christian message with their words of intolerance and hate, or who turn it into some kind of system for gaining financial prosperity--proclaiming that if you have faith, God will bless you with financial success, or others who use the Christian tradition as a political tool for personal gain. We are cautioned to beware of thieves, those who try to steal the flock, to be cautious of voices who try to lure the flock away from the sheepfold.

In our passage from John today, Jesus declares that instead of being lured by thieves and bandits, his sheep know his voice and will follow him instead of the stranger. Wouldn't that be nice, to know what Jesus' voice sounds like? Wouldn't it make life a lot easier if we could hear Jesus' voice? Don't you wonder what Jesus' voice sounds like?

And yet, we do know, don't we! We have four gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teachings that enable us to hear his voice. We have the writings and teachings of the early

Christian community to help us hear Jesus' voice. We have this church community where we gather to discern together what Jesus' voice is saying to us. We *do* know what Jesus' voice is saying. It is the voice of compassion and love. It is the voice of forgiveness and generosity. It is the voice of service and sacrifice. It is the voice calling for us to turn our lives around and enabling transformation. It is the voice of acceptance and hope and joy.

We know what Jesus' voice sounds like and thus, we can recognize the voices of the stranger and of the thief when they pop up in life. Any voice that demeans another human being is *not* the voice of Jesus. Any voice that plays off our fears and entices us to give in to our basest impulses is *not* Jesus' voice. Any voice that encourages selfishness is *not* Jesus' voice. Any voice that benefits only the privileged and does not care about the vulnerable is *not* Jesus' voice. Any voice that refuses to accept personal fault or failure is *not* Jesus' voice.

Sometimes, sometimes we *will* all be led astray by these false voices. Sometimes these voices might even come from our own mouths or be found in our own hearts and lived out in our own actions. But we come here each week to listen for the voice of Jesus, our Shepherd. We read the scriptures, we listen to one another, we pray to God's Spirit, so that the voice of our Shepherd might be heard through all the false voices luring us out of the sheepfold. We come because there are indeed real dangers within us and around us, threatening our welfare.

And that is why we need the Good Shepherd. Like all sheep, we need a shepherd. In the ancient world, sheep were very valuable creatures. Sheep provided wool for clothing and meat and milk for food. And so the shepherd was necessary to protect a valuable investment. In a similar way, we are valuable to God--not economically but because we were created by God and we are loved by God and because God knows the beautiful potential that resides within us.

Within each of us is the holy imprint of our God. God has made an investment in us, in you. And so the Good Shepherd comes to protect God's precious investment.

Notice, we are not just given a shepherd but rather the "good" shepherd. This is not just any ordinary shepherd. Instead, Jesus tells us that he is the *Good* Shepherd. And what makes him especially *good*? Jesus says, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." So valuable are you to God that the Shepherd is prepared to lay down his life for you. And indeed has.

Some Christians talk about Jesus laying down his life so that you and I will know life beyond this world. And certainly, we do profess the belief that God's love transcends the grave and raises us to a life beyond death. But Jesus gives us a clue right here in this passage that the reason he lays down his life is not merely so we will enjoy an afterlife. Jesus states right here in our passage, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." As the Good Shepherd, Jesus comes to protect us from those forces beyond us and within us that would pose a danger to the abundant, meaningful life God desires for us, for the abundant, meaningful life God desires for you!

God never promises us that if we have faith we will never know hardship or loss or struggle. God never promises us a life without dangers. Even in the beloved 23rd Psalm we hear the writer speak of enemies and dangers and the shadow of death, even while voicing confidence in the shepherd. Hardships, trials, difficulties, sorrow--these things we will encounter in life. But God does send us a Shepherd, a *good* shepherd, to guide us in the right paths--the paths of mercy and love, of forgiveness and kindness, the paths of hope and transformation, so that none of us valuable sheep may be lost.

