“Not just the shepherd”

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Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

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***Psalm 23***

***1The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2    He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
3    he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.***

***4Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff,
    they comfort me.***

***5You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
    my whole life long.***

***John 10:1-10***

***10 “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.***

***7So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.***

Time and time again I am reminded by scripture, that what we read in the Bible is the living word of God to us today. Being the living word means that there is something beyond factual truth that is happening when scripture is encountered. Both of the texts for today remind me of this because, while I don’t have a lot of experience with shepherds or sheep, I do have an experience of lying beside still waters while in the valley of darkness.

About 30 years ago I was at my first church retreat up at Bishop’s Ranch, feeling a bunch of things. New to the church, new to this group of friends, new to California, new to group retreats. And as I talk about a lot, new to that dark dark world of depression, the valley in the shadow of death; the darkest valley. The lovely people I was on the retreat with let me do just that – retreat – so I just slept a lot, walked a lot, spent lots of time on my own. At one point I was lying in the grass, hoping to write in my journal, enjoying the little river or pond that I was near, when I realized that I was lying down in a green pasture next to still waters! Only vaguely familiar with psalm 23, I was kind of shocked! I didn’t even need a metaphor! I’m sure I looked up the psalm then and read the rest of it and didn’t see myself in any of it – no restored soul, not comforted, not followed by goodness or mercy. It didn’t matter though, I still felt like the realization about the green grass and still water was worth noting. Without reading scripture, the living word was still able to reach me. Sometimes we read scripture and then go find it in our lives. Sometimes scripture finds us first. That first real life encounter with scripture was almost in spite of me. 30 years later, I can say that my cup does overflow and scripture comes to life almost daily. The same scripture can have one impact one time, and a different impact another time.

Psalm 23 is one of the most popular items of scripture for religious and secular settings alike. The words have been adapted and interpreted by artists in many fields. While some are distraught by any change in their memorized version of this psalm, others are comforted by wording that helps them encounter scripture more fully. That’s part of the living nature of scripture. The living word. Maybe you can remember a time when this particular psalm touched you in a meaningful way.

The twenty-third psalm is written in the first person – the voice of one person describing their relationship with the Lord. To a person living at the time that the psalm was written, imagining God as a shepherd would have been lovely, and even to us, it is something we can imagine. The gospel lesson for today, is similar because it refers to sheep and the gatekeeper, it stops short of Jesus saying “I am the Good Shepherd.”

Commentator Karoline Lewis, always with a sense of humor, writes, “Liturgically sensitive preachers will immediately take note that the 4th Sunday of Easter in the Revised Common Lectionary is always “Good Shepherd Sunday” and perhaps will then let out an audible sigh of despair. It’s not that we don’t *like* Jesus as the Good Shepherd. After all, probably half of Christian art would disappear were it not for this popular image of Jesus. The hint of exasperation arises when we find ourselves asking, what more is there to say about Jesus, the Good Shepherd? How many times can I talk about shepherding practices in ancient Palestine? Do my congregants really want to hear again that they are all a bunch of dimwitted sheep? Please, anything but Jesus as the Shepherd.”1

Lewis notes that those exasperated preachers get their wish today because our text stops at verse 10, and it is not until verse 11 that Jesus says “I am the Good Shepherd.” So if this text hasn’t quite reached the gospel of John’s version of the good shepherd yet, what is it saying?

To discover that, we should talk about the differences between the psalm and the gospel. The psalms are traditionally written in the form of a single person speaking. They are prayers of joy, lament, celebration, concern, and of stories. The gospels were written to be shared in and for communities. A psalm is usually shorter and self-contained, but the gospel message is told in longer prose. The gospel lesson for today is part of a much larger story within the gospel of John. Way back in chapter 9, Jesus healed a man who was born blind. There is a pattern that this gospel writer uses that consists of three parts. First there is the **sign**, the healing of the man born blind. Second, there is **dialogue** where the disciples and those involved try to make sense of the sign. Remember our theater version of scripture for these texts? Even the parents of the healed man wouldn’t admit to Jesus’ having performed a miracle because they didn’t want to speak in favor of anything to do with the controversial Jesus. Third, there is a **discourse**. The discourse is after the sign, after the dialogue, when Jesus then explains and interprets all that has happened.

Today’s scripture is part of that discourse. Twice, before Jesus says that he is the good shepherd, Jesus says that he is the gate. Debi Thomas reminds us of the role of the gate, as she retells the story of her visit to Friendship Park in a border town with Mexico. She describes this group of Christians for over 10 years now has been gathering to worship and share communion. The group has continued to share despite any barrier that the border patrol have put in place. When they couldn’t be close enough to hear one another’s voices, they stood 50 feet apart and shared worship over cell phones. She says, “Some years ago, when the chain-link border fence gave way to a steel barrier, worshipers continued to pass the peace across the border — pinky to pinky through tiny holes in the wall.” It’s with this in mind, that she thinks about Jesus as the gate. She writes, “Not, “I am the wall, the barrier, the enclosure, the dividing line.” Not, “I am that which separates, isolates, segregates, and incarcerates.” I am the gate. The door. The opening. The passageway. The place where freedom begins.”2

Going back to the man healed from blindness, Jesus was the gate for this man, out of the pen of ostracization, isolation, insecurity, fear and danger. Jesus opens the gate for this man to enter into the abundance of his new life – into the security of community. The man has gone through the gate of Jesus into “the promise of pasture and protection” and know “sustenance and security.1 He is no longer in the valley of the shadow of death. The healed man, the disciples overhearing Jesus’ discourse in today’s text, and you and I – we are all able to enter through this gate, knowing that Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly.

Well, that’s pretty awesome. Easy, right, believe in the truth of Jesus Christ and his life and death, and this magic life will appear. No, of course not. Our abundant life is not ours if it is not also for everyone. The healed man was saved from a life of isolation and marginalization to a life of security in a community. The life that has been given to us is now ours to share with others. The life that has been given to us is to equip us to see that others share in the same salvation – the salvation from suffering, bullying, war, over use of our resources, legislation that denies basic rights, the cycle of harm humans participate in. We can change that cycle. Every action, prayer, expression, witness to mutual benefit moves the dial just a bit closer to God’s vision for us.

Easter may be celebrated on one day, but the 50 days after Easter make up a season in which all of our texts remind us how to be a resurrection people. We are reminded to be liberators. Just as an individual psalm may be perfect for an *individual* encounter with scripture, this gospel lesson is for us an encounter with scripture for *community*. We as individuals are not the gate. We are not the ones who open and close the gate and decide who is in, who is out, who is a thief, who is a bandit. We are the ones who have also been graced with a new life as the formerly blind man has been, and have found Jesus at the gate. His new life was not the end of his story, but the beginning of his story. Because Jesus didn’t say he was the light of the *few*. He said, “I am the light of the *world*.”

Amen.

1<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-4>

2<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2626-i-am-the-gate>,Debi Thomas, April 26, 2020