

THE GATE

PS. 23; ACTS 2:42-47; JN. 10:1-10, 11, 14

TODAY IS WHAT'S KNOWN EVERY YEAR AS SHEEP OR SHEPHERD SUNDAY. I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN SEE THIS VERY WELL. IT'S MY WEDDING DRESS FROM 1973. CAN ANYONE TELL ME WHY MY MOM AND GRANDMA HAD A FIT WHEN THEY SAW IT AND DIDN'T WANT ME TO WEAR IT? IT'S HARD TO TELL NOW, BUT THE FRONT PANEL USED TO BE PINK. BACK THEN, IT WAS SCANDALOUS TO NOT HAVE A PURE WHITE WEDDING DRESS. WE KNOW THAT NOWADAYS, PEOPLE WEAR ALL KINDS OF THINGS. MY DRESS HAS BEEN HANGING IN A CLOSET FOR DECADES, NOW IT'S JUST AN OLD OUTDATED RELIC WITH NO MEANING FOR ANYONE BUT MAYBE ME AND ARNIE. BACK THEN, YOU MIGHT HAVE EITHER SAID I REFUSED TO FOLLOW TRADITION BLINDLY AS A SHEEP OR THAT I WAS A BLACK SHEEP.

I BROUGHT MY WEDDING DRESS UP BECAUSE OF THE DIFFICULTY TO PREACH AGAIN, USING THE METAPHOR OF SHEEP AND SHEPHERD IN MODERN TIMES. IT'S A CULTURE AND TIME AND AUDIENCE SPECIFIC FIGURE OF SPEECH. JOHN TELLS US JESUS USED THIS FIGURE OF SPEECH, BUT THEY DID NOT UNDERSTAND HIM.

ACTUALLY HE USED SEVERAL FIGURES OF SPEECH: SHEEP, THIEVES, BANDITS, WOLVES, GATEKEEPER, STRANGER, GATE, AND FINALLY SHEPHERD. THERE'S A PROGRESSION THERE BEFORE HE GETS TO THE TWO I AM STATEMENTS I AM THE GATE, I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD.

WHO WAS JESUS SPEAKING TO? SOME PHARISEES WHO WERE WITH HIM, PERHAPS GATHERING DATA TO ACCUSE HIM OF MISDEEDS. JESUS HAD JUST HEALED A BLIND MAN ON THE SABBATH CAUSING AN UPROAR AMONGST THE PHARISEES, WHO HAD THROWN THE FORMERLY BLIND MAN OUT OF THE SYNAGOGUE. JESUS FOUND OUT AND WENT TO THE MAN TO DRAW HIM BACK INTO COMMUNITY AND REVEALING HIMSELF TO THE MAN. THE PHARISEES, EVER HOVERING ABOUT, EAVESDROPPING, HAVE BASICALLY JUST BEEN CALLED

SPIRITUALLY BLIND. WHEN THEY ASK ABOUT IT, THIS STORY ABOUT THE SHEEP PEN IS HIS RESPONSE.

IT'S MEANT TO CONTRAST THE PHARISEES WAY OF DOING FAITH WITH JESUS' WAY. HE LIKENS THEM TO THIEVES AND ROBBERS, STRANGERS TO THE PEOPLE. IT'S MEANT TO POINT OUT THAT THEIR FOLLOWING OF THE LETTER OF THE LAW AS A WAY TO WIN FAVOR WITH GOD IS STIFLING THE LIFE RIGHT OUT OF FOLKS. IT'S MEANT TO CALL THEM OUT FOR OVER TAXATION AND COLLUSION WITH THE ROMANS.

IT'S MEANT TO LAY CLAIM TO JESUS' IDENTITY AND PURPOSE AND MOTIVE, AND HIS CLAIM ON GOD'S PEOPLE.

THE PHARISEES ARE COMMITTING RELIGIOUS BANDITRY, MASQUERADING AS PIOUS LEADERS, IN TRUTH WITH SELFISH, SELF-PRESERVING MOTIVES. THE GOOD SHEPHERD HAS A MUCH DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIP, HIS IS SACRIFICIAL. HIS WORK AND HIS LIFE ARE FOR THE WELL BEING OF THE SHEEP. AS IN PSALM 23, HIS PLACE IS TO PROVIDE AND PROTECT, NOT ROB AND ABANDON.

JESUS INSISTS THAT WE ARE TO RECEIVE ABUNDANT LIFE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM, NOT ACHIEVE IT BY PAYING OR FOLLOWING LAWS.

JESUS IS WILLING TO GIVE HIS LIFE FOR SOMETHING BIGGER THAN HIS LIFE.

THERE IS A CONTINUING THEME IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN. LEADING IN AND LEADING OR SENDING OUT.

THE GOSPEL WAS WRITTEN IN A TIME WHEN CHRISTIANS WERE BEING PERSECUTED AND NEEDED ENCOURAGEMENT, AND COMFORT, AND FORTITUDE TO KEEP BELIEVING IN JESUS.

ONE WAY THEY WERE PERSECUTED IS BEING ARRESTED AND THROWN INTO A LIONS DEN TO BE DEVoured ALIVE.

THE SHEEP PEN METAPHOR IS ONE OF SAFETY AND PROTECTION. JOHN WANTS PEOPLE TO BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS STILL WITH THEM. KNOWS EACH OF THEM BY NAME. LOVES THEM. WANTS THEM TO HAVE FULL LIFE.

AS THE SHEPHERD CALLING THEM BY NAME, HE LEADS THEM OUT PAST THE GATEKEEPER INTO GREEN PASTURES. THE ONLY TIME A SHEEP PEN WOULD HAVE HAD A GATEKEEPER WOULD HAVE BEEN AT THE PLACE OF SACRIFICE FOR THE TEMPLE. THAT PEN WAS NOT ONE OF PROTECTION, BUT IMPENDING DEATH. THIS IS A VERY SYMBOLIC WAY TO SAY JESUS LEADS US TO LIFE, NOT DEATH. HIS RESURRECTION CONQUERS DEATH.

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS WE CAN HEAR JESUS SPEAKING OF BEING SENT.

AS THE FATHER SENT ME, SO I SEND YOU.

AS I FORGIVE, SO I SEND YOU TO FORGIVE.

AS I FEED THE HUNGRY, SO I SEND YOU TO FEED THE HUNGRY.

AS I HEAL, SO I SEND YOU TO HEAL.

AS I SUFFER, SO I SEND YOU TO DIE TO SELF.

AS I SHEPHERD, SO I SEND YOU TO LEAD.

I LEAD YOU IN TO REST, I SEND YOU OUT TO LIVE ABUNDANT LIVES SPENT FOR SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOUR LIFE.

I SEND YOU TO DO THE HARD WORK OF LOVE.

IT WAS NOT UNTIL PENTECOST, UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT THROUGH PETER'S PREACHING THAT THE DISCIPLES BEGAN TO GET WHAT JESUS TAUGHT.

HOW DID THEY RESPOND? AS A COMMUNITY.

TEACHING AND LEARNING TOGETHER, FELLOWSHIPING TOGETHER, CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER, PRAYING TOGETHER. DAILY.

THEY PRACTICED THIS WAY OF LIFE, NOT FOR THE GOOD OF THEMSELVES BUT FOR THE GOOD OF THE WORLD, ADDING TO THEIR NUMBER DAILY.

THEY DID THE HARD WORK OF LOVE TOGETHER.

THE LIFE DESCRIBED IN ACTS 2 IS A RECKLESS, BEAUTIFUL EXPRESSION OF LIVING OUT THEIR THEOLOGY.

THEY EXPERIENCED JUSTICE TOGETHER, WORSHIP TOGETHER, SUPERNATURAL SHARING WITH EACH OTHER.

WAS IT SUSTAINABLE? APPARENTLY NOT. I DON'T SEE MUCH OF THAT KIND OF LIVING NOWADAYS. WHY NOT? BECAUSE SOME OF US REMAIN LIARS, THIEVES, PREDATORS, FOLLOWERS OF OTHER VOICES THAN THE GOOD SHEPHERD, WILLING TO LET OUR FELLOWS BE LED TO THE SLAUGHTER TO SAVE OUR OWN SKINS, UNWILLING TO LIVE SACRIFICIALLY, UNWILLING TO DO THAT HARD WORK OF LOVE.

I ASKED MYSELF AT THIS POINT, SO WHERE'S THE GOOD NEWS?

THE ANSWER I HEARD, I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD.

NOT I WAS THE GOOD SHEPHERD, I AM.

JESUS IS OUR RISEN, ALIVE, STILL WITH US, STILL POWERFUL, STILL LEADING, STILL CALLING BY NAME, STILL COURAGEOUSLY CALLING OUT TRUTH TO POWER, STILL SENDING GOOD SHEPHERD. SURELY, IN FOLLOWING HIM, GOODNESS AND MERCY WILL FOLLOW US ALL THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES, AS WE STUMBLE AND TRUDGE OUR WAY INTO FIGURING OUT WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE OUT OUR THEOLOGY.

WE'RE KIND OF PENNED UP RIGHT NOW, WITH PLENTY OF TIME TO PONDER THESE KINDS OF THINGS. I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING WHERE AND HOW AND WHY JESUS WILL CALL OUR NAME AND SEND US OUT.

I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO THE OPPORTUNITY TO PRACTICE RECKLESSLY MY THEOLOGY AGAIN. I HOPE IT'S WORTHY OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD.

LET US PRAY: LORD JESUS, YOU ARE SO MANY THINGS TO US. THANK YOU FOR LOVING US. HELP US TO HEAR AND HEED YOUR VOICE ABOVE ALL OTHERS. HELP US TO GROW IN COMMUNITY TEACHING, LEARNING, FELLOWSHIPING, CARING, AND PRAYING TOGETHER.

HELP US IMAGINE AND WORK FOR A WORLD THAT MORE RESEMBLES THE KINGDOM OF GOD THAN THE FOOLISHNESS OF HUMANKIND.

SPEAK TO US THAT WE MIGHT HAVE LIFE ABUNDANT. AMEN.