

Scriptures:

Psalm 23

John 10:1-21

“The Good Shepherd.”

Throughout the gospels of Matthew ---- Mark and Luke --- we have numerous parables.

In fact in the first three gospels Jesus tells 37 stories --- or parables ---- in order to open people’s eyes to the new reality in Jesus Christ.

And of course many of them are familiar.

Even people who know very little else about the Bible not only know about some of Jesus’ more famous parables --- the Good Samaritan --- the Prodigal’s Son ----- but they have even adopted some of their phrasings --- being a “Good Samaritan” for example ----- has become a popular phrase even among those who don’t consider themselves Christians.

And yet curiously enough.

Despite their popularity and the depth of teaching and truth in the parables -- --- the fourth Gospel --- John’s gospel --- doesn’t contain any of these helpful --- and faithful --- parables of Christ.

Instead --- almost as though in their place ---- John has the 7 famous ---- “I am” ---- statements --- the 7 ---- “I am” teachings of Jesus.

“I am the bread of life ----- I am the light of the world ----- I am the resurrection and the life” ---- and so on.

And for today we have ---- “I am the gate” ----- and --- “I am the Good Shepherd.”

“I am the gate” ----- and --- “I am the Good Shepherd.”

And in truth to simply hear --- “I am the good shepherd” ----- doesn’t really capture the whole truth and meaning of what Jesus was getting at.

What we hear as “good” here ---“the good shepherd” ---- is a whole lot more than just good ---- as in right or faithful.

“Good” ----- as in “good shepherd” ---- also means ---- perfect --- and noble ---- precious and wonderful shepherd.

And it also contains an element of completeness and finality to as well ---- as in “the one” and “the only” shepherd --- as opposed to just one shepherd among many.

And we know this in part because the Biblical Greek for this phrase ----- “good shepherd ----- connotes much more than just good as we might think of it.

And we also know that the type of shepherd Jesus was referring to in speaking of Himself as the good shepherd includes an element of completeness ----- as in “the one and only shepherd” --- because of the other --- “I am” ---- statement that comes before it --- “I am the gate.”

“I am the gate” ---- sheds light on ---- “I am the good shepherd.”

Indeed ----- we can’t fully appreciate ----- “I am the good shepherd” ----- without first considering ---- “I am the gate.”

Hill side sheep folds in the near east at the time of Jesus were basically just open spaces enclosed by a stone wall with no door or gate over the opening through which the sheep entered and exited.

They were like a stone or wood fence with a little opening for the sheep to go in and out of.

And each night the shepherd would herd the sheep in and then lay down to keep watch and sleep across the opening.

You can see this image ----- on the screen.

In a very literal sense the shepherd laid down their body ----- and risked their life for the sheep.

A wolf or a fox --- or a thief for that matter ----- would literally have to go over or through the body of the shepherd to get to the sheep.

Jesus saying ----- “I am the gate” ----- takes on a different dimension when we think of it this way --- or at least ought to.

In this sense then ----- being a good shepherd ---- also means being a good gate --- being willing to literally lay your body down --- lay your life down for the sake of your sheep --- for the sake of those you are entrusted to care for.

And along with this idea of the shepherd not just caring for the sheep in a distant or hands off kind of way --- like a hired hand as Jesus says -----and instead literally laying down in the path of danger for them ----- we do well to remember that at the time of Christ sheep were not generally killed for their meat and instead were largely kept alive for their fleece for wool.

Which is significant because it means that the shepherd often had the very same sheep for many many years.

There was an intimacy and familiarity between the shepherd and their sheep that comes from having spent not only many days together but also through having to work through various challenges and threats together.

Jesus as the good shepherd isn't just about a bunch of dim witted sheep following Him.

It's about intimate relationship ----- sacrifice ----- shared experience ----- day in day out relationship building ---- trust and familiarity --- communion.

The sheep only ever had one shepherd --- there was only ever just one whom they trusted and followed.

The shepherd was their one and only keeper ---- watcher --- guardian and provider.

The shepherd was their one and only gateway ---- and access point to life.

Just as the shepherd is the one and only ---- keeper ----- guardian ----- provider ----- and gateway to life ----- so Jesus is the one and only ---- keeper --- guardian ----- provider ----- and gateway to life.

And more precisely Jesus is the one and only ---- keeper --- guardian ----- provider ----- and gateway to God ----- and to salvation.

And perhaps more than any other passage --- more than any other words of Christ in all of scripture these ones --- this idea of Jesus as the gate --- the only gate --- the only way to God and salvation ----- is deeply troubling to some --- and at the same time a great comfort to others.

I have had so many people --- struggling believers in particular --- but also some very strong believers too ----- say to me ---- “I just can’t understand how the Bible can say that no one goes to God --- is saved ----- except through Jesus.”

“I can’t believe ---- or accept ---- that Jesus is the **only** gateway to God.”

This idea of Jesus being the only gate --- the only door --- the only road --- the only good shepherd who leads people to God and salvation is troubling for some.

And it’s troubling because they have had other ----- “holy experiences” --- or been led to holiness and the presence of God in other ways --- through other doors ----- gates ---- and shepherds as well.

So what does scripture say about this?

What does scripture say about the possibility of being led to God by someone or someway other than Jesus Christ ---- it’s very clear ----

The words of Christ -----

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.”

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Both from our gospel reading today.

And then there is ---- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.” ---- John 14 verse 6 ---- another of Jesus’ ---- “I am” ----- sayings.

Great comfort ----- certainty --- clarity ----- truth ----- for many.

Confusing --- hard to agree with --- exclusive --- limiting ---for others.

Some people want to think of Christ as “a” gate and “a” good shepherd.

A gate or road ---- to God --- to salvation --- among many other possible roads and ways to God and therefore also to salvation.

“A” ----- good shepherd ----- not “the” ---- but “a” ---- good shepherd --- one among many --- one among a number of other good shepherds.

Perhaps --- but then again ----- NO.

We may see aspects of God’s wonder and beauty and holiness.

We may see glimpses of the noble and beautiful.

We may have experiences of the precious wonder of God --- that don’t obviously or overtly involve Christ.

In a flower --- or the sunset ---- in a tasty piece of fruit or vegetable ----- in a piece of chocolate ---- chocolate can be pretty divine can’t it? ----- dark Swiss chocolate in particular is pretty divine if you ask me.

We may experience the precious wonder of God ----- in the face of another - ----- in the faces of the ones we love the most.

Yes ----- God is everywhere around us for sure --- manifesting Himself in the whole of creation as He so desires.

But ----- only ever partially.

Without Christ ---- all of the beauty and wonder and holiness we may experience in the world is but partial --- and misguided sometimes even.

Partial because only in Christ do we have the complete ---- nothing needs to be added to --- or can be added to ----- complete expression of the love and desires of God for His creation.

And misguided because without Christ we cannot be fully introduced to God --- and we can all too easily be led astray.

Jesus is the introduction to God which by ourselves we could never have obtained or discovered.

And Jesus is the only one who introduces us to all of God.

To the full presence and power and love and compassion of God --- and not just the partial that we may get in a flower or a sunset or a wise expression or spiritual wisdom --- or piece of chocolate even.

Yes there may be a wise person --- a poet --- or prophet even who points us in the direction of God.

Moses does this wonderfully ----- Isaiah was a champion of this ---- Jeremiah may have had the most difficult of circumstances but he still managed to point many people in the direction of God.

But even these --- some of the greatest of all people to ever speak and lead people to God ----- are only ever partial.

We may even see the face of God in another --- but alas this too is only ever ----- and always ---- partial.

We may experience God --- in a beautiful piece of music --- or a poem.

A meal ---- the silence of a summer evening on the lake --- and so on.

But these are and always will be --- partial.

God gave us John ----- and the community to which he spoke and taught and lived and witness in --- for a reason.

God gave us John and His gospel ---- for a reason.

God gave us John ---- and his memory of these --- “I am saying of Christ.” --
--- for a reason.

God gave us John and his community ---- and his gospel --- God gave us the
“I am” --- sayings of Jesus --- to make it abundantly clear that there is only
one Christ.

To make it abundantly clear that there is only one complete ---- nothing
needs to be added to ---- or taken away ----- expression of the will ---- and
love and desire of God for His creation.

God gave us John and his community to remind us ----- “That God so loved
the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him
shall not perish but have life eternal.”

God gave us John and his community to remind us that Jesus said ----- “I am
the bread of life ---- he who comes to shall not hunger.

God gave us John and his community to remind us that Jesus said ----- “I am
the light of the world --- he who follows me shall not walk in the darkness --
- but shall have the light of life.”

God gave us John and his community to remind us that Jesus said ----- “I am
the resurrection and the life ---- he who believes in me shall live even though
he dies.”

God gave us John and his community to remind us that Jesus said ----- “I am
the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through
me”

God gave us John and his community to remind us that Jesus said ----- I am
the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.”

And specifically for today -----

God gave us John and his community to remind us that Jesus said ----- “I am
the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go
out, and find pasture.”

As well as -----

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

God gave us John and his community to remind us that all we need is Jesus -
-- nothing more and nothing less to connect us with God --- and nothing
more and nothing less to grant us salvation ----- life abundant and life
everlasting.

There is only one ---- way truth and light --- one gate --- one shepherd ---
one Saviour ---- and Lord of all ---- and it is Jesus Christ.

The image of Christ as a good ----- gate keeping --- laying down His life ----
---- shepherd.

Is far more than just a pleasant ----- peaceful --- pastoral image of guarding
and providing for.

As verse 9 from our gospel reading today indicates ---- it is also a saving
image ---- whoever enters through me will be **saved** ---- Jesus says.

The image of Christ as a good ----- gate keeping --- laying down His life ----
---- shepherd.

Is decisive ---- complete ----- and final.

Christ isn't an option --- a gate --- among many others gates and roads.

Christ isn't a shepherd or a teacher among many other shepherds and
teachers.

And whether this be a great comfort or a great disturbance to how we
understand this world.

It is simply the truth.

Whether we are like the Jews in John's gospel today who wonder ----- in
verse 20 --- if Jesus is raving mad and even worth listening to.

Or ----- if we are like the faithful followers who **only** listen to **His** voice.

Either way --- sooner or later ----- we will come to the gate that is Christ ---- the place where the crossroads meet ----- and ----we will find Him lying there in wait.

We will find him standing guard by the watch at night.

And we will find Him there ----- opening up and letting people in and out.

And we will find Him there --- calling some in and others out.

And we will find Him there ----- opening up and giving access to the will and the way of God.

And we will also find Him there slaughtered --- crucified.

The saving ---- atoning --- redeeming --- reconciling one.

And ----- yes ----- we will find Him there ----- the risen --- ascended --- resurrected one.

He is the good shepherd at the gate ---- ready --- and willing --- and able ---- to do whatever it is we truly need Him too.

He is our shepherd.

Our good --- and holy ----- and just ---- and saving one.

He is our King of love ----- who came that we might have life ---- life abundant --- and life everlasting.

Are there other gates in life ---- yes.

Are there other shepherds in life ---- yes.

Will they lead us to God --- doubtful ---- and partial at best --- and because of this ---- finally ----- NO.

And then there is the good and faithful one.

The one and only complete and saving one.

The one who reveals to us totally and completely ---- and by example.

What exactly God desires of us.

Jesus the Christ ---- the good shepherd ----- the shepherd of love.

The one and only ---- good --- holy --- just ---- and saving one.

Amen.