



## CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

*It's not all shepherds and lambs*

Good Shepherd Sunday, *John 10:1-10*, May 3, 2020

The Very Rev. Dr. Michael Sniffen, Dean of the Cathedral

In John's Gospel, Jesus can be – as Mark Twain might say – ‘confusing as all get out!’ At least, I think so.

The metaphors are long. They're elaborate and somewhat perplexing. The parabolic language seems at once about everything and nothing. It is **no** surprise to me that only a few verses into today's Gospel, we hear - - “Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying.” No kidding! Neither do I! Just what exactly is Jesus going on about!?

On the surface it makes a certain kind of sense – shepherd, sheep, pasture, gatekeeper and all...got it. But what bearing does this have on our lives – especially now – when we need guidance and hope in abundance?

I had a mentor some years ago who used to dismiss vague theology that had no traction –no real grit– by saying, “You know, Christianity is not all shepherds and lambs...” By this he meant that faith which exists primarily to soothe rather than to heal, equip and strengthen - is not all there is. There's more. It's not all shepherds and lambs. There **is** more. And we know that's true deep down, don't we? When we get into the thick of life. When the wolf is at our door – we need more than shepherds and lambs. And thank God, there is more.

God provides more – right here in today's Gospel.

Oh, we've got shepherds and lambs...but we've also got a stranger, a thief, a gatekeeper, a bandit. And until we discover the gate – we've got NO WAY OUT! No way out. That's maybe more than we bargained for. As if quarantine, social distancing and the whole human family in danger - was not already causing us to feel trapped.

(No Way Out is also a good 80's movie with Kevin Costner and Gene Hackman, by the way. Check it out.)

This gospel pens us in early on – and some in the story are not having it. People are hopping the fence. They are passing themselves off as others. They're stealing things. Oh, the setting might seem quite 'shepherds and lambs,' but under the veneer of rustic simplicity is an undertow of trouble that puts everyone in harm's way in a New York minute.

All is not well.

There is a stranger at the gate. There is a thief in the fold. There is a bandit masquerading as our friend and protector. This story is ready to go south in all sorts of ways, and I don't mean for the winter.

Sounds like life to me. Sounds like my life, maybe yours too? But Jesus is not finished with the story. No sooner does John acknowledge the confusion of his hearers than Jesus imposes himself with some Good News.

This scene is a mess, he seems to say. It's scary. You may not know whom to trust. But the story isn't about what it seems to be about. It's not about shepherds and lambs. It's not about the shady or noble characters. It isn't about farming. It's about something else. Did you catch it?

This story is about the gate. It's about the gate. I am the Gate, says Jesus. Seek me and you will find your way. Never lose sight of this.

All sorts of things are happening around us and in us and to us and that's all important. It's very important. It's not to be discounted. But this particular story is about one thing. The gate. Our relationship to the gate gives us agency in our own stories. "I am the gate" says Jesus. I am the gate - which opens when you feel there is nowhere else to go. I am the gate which allows for safe passage from this mortal life into life eternal, even now. I am the gate to undiscovered worlds within yourself. I am the gate opening to limitless hope. I am the

gate through which you may enter more deeply into the present moment. I am the gate - not of avoidance, or escape, but of life and life abundant!

I am the gate, says Jesus. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

My goodness – who ever thought a gate could be so important? Isn't it just an opening in the fence? Who cares?

No, says Jesus – pay attention to where I am in the story. The gate is me. I am the gate, and that changes everything. Without the gate, life can seem confusing, confounding, confining - an unending incarceration of circumstances from which there is no escape but death. But discovering the gate opens us to a life of potential, of hope, of resurrection and of unending discovery.

To those who feel stuck, lonely, anxious, afraid, numb or in grief – Jesus says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

My God – is this Good News! We are never trapped in our own stories. God has provided a gate through which to pass from life into abundant life. And the gate is always open. And the gate is Jesus Christ.