

## The Sheep and the Gate

I am often very grateful for Jesus' first followers - and not just because they gave us the stories that allow us to know and follow him. The disciples are often portrayed as slow to catch on and bumbling, even as they are loyal and eager. They want to believe, they trust Jesus, and they listen...and still sometimes they don't get it. When I hear a parable like the one we hear today about sheep and a sheepfold and a gate it is a huge relief that I'm not the only one at the end of the story who is confused.

Those first followers lived in a sheep-herding culture and still didn't understand what Jesus was talking about with this parable! So it feels okay that I have to take some extra time to figure it out.

What Jesus is telling them - and telling us - is what it means to know God and be known by God. And the comparison to sheep is a good one. Sheep are utterly dependent on their shepherd for their lives. They are at the bottom of the food chain in the natural world. They have no natural defenses against predators. (You might be isolating at home with a dog or cat that you feed and let in and out and in and out of your house- a sheep is more defenseless and dependent than your pet.) Also, the shepherd keeps the sheep together in a flock and, in this parable, keeps them safe from thieves. The shepherd leads them to pastures in the day and to a safe pen at night.

Even those of us in 21st century Austin can understand that much. Here's where it gets a little - strange. Jesus says about the sheep, "I am the gate." If you are like me, you didn't realize sheep need a gate. So I did a little research using google and a friend who used to raise sheep. Here's what I learned:

- In the first century and even now, at the end of the day sheep are guided into a sheepfold or pen. In Jesus' day, there would be pens at the home of the shepherd and today the pens are near the barn.  
But if the flock is a distance away from home, there would be a pen out there, too. IN the fields, in the mountains. More rustic, but serving the same purpose.
- Ancient sheepfolds had stone walls with briars on top to keep sheep in and robbers out. Also to keep out wolves.
- There is only one way in and out of the pen- and that's the gate. So the shepherd would steer the flock through the gate into the pen at night and they would all sleep until morning.

So how does that make Jesus the gate? Is he the opening we go thru between night and day? Between sleep and wake?

Here's the most beautiful part of the sheep gate analogy: to keep the sheep safe at night, the shepherd would lie down across the gate opening. The shepherd was the gate, the door. There was no way for thieves or wolves to get to the sheep except through the shepherd. The shepherd becomes a gate and literally puts himself between

the sheep and danger so that - as the parable says - they can have life and have it abundantly.

This is what Jesus says he does for us. He is the gate. Not only does he show us the way into and out of the safe pen at night and the life-giving pastures in the morning, he is the very thing that stands between us and danger. This parable tells us that Jesus cares for us every bit as much as a shepherd cares for sheep - and that care is not remote or mystical or hard to understand. It is direct and personal and connected to every facet of our everyday lives.

Imagine what a message like that means to Jesus' first followers. Here are men and women living in a time and place when 90% of all people lived in extreme poverty. It was an agricultural society - like most societies have been until very recently - in which most people worked very hard, got very dirty, and may not have felt valued or valuable.

Into this group of ragtag men and women comes Jesus to tell them that -

- The God who created everything that is...
- The God worshipped in the glorious temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem...
- The God who anoints kings...
- This God knows each and every one of them as intimately as a shepherd knows his or her sheep.

This is how God knows **YOU**. Knows your tendency to wander, knows all your injuries, knows when you need nourishment and where to find it.

So now we know what a sheep gate is and why it is so important. And we can understand that Jesus the Gate is keeping us safe with his very being the way a shepherd does for a flock.

Here's something implied in that parable that the first century audience would understand implicitly and that we need help with: Sheep do not choose their shepherd. They rely on the shepherd to guide them to pastures and tend their wounds and keep them together and protect them from danger. They can't pick their shepherd, they are absolutely unable to do it. The shepherd chooses them.

And that is true for us as well. This is NOT a parable about how we should choose Jesus. It is about how we have already been chosen. Jesus chooses us.

The key message in this parable and of the whole Gospel of John is that Jesus came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. Jesus is the way we gain access to that abundant life - not because we picked it from a menu, but because Jesus chose us.

We like to think of ourselves as shepherds - and sometimes that analogy works. I definitely feel like in my role as a parent. It is not unusual to say in a work context that

someone is shepherding a project. Sometimes clergy are called pastors - which is another name for shepherd. I am betting sometimes we all feel that way - that we are herding the people and events of our life to keep them in a controllable, safe situation.

But in scripture, we are more often compared to sheep.

This is good news! Right now I am betting we all feel a bit confined. Kept in our walled pens way too long, wanting to get back to our pastures, our work, our schools.

Know that God has chosen you. Just as God chose the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and the exiled people of Israel taken to Babylon. God has chosen you. Jesus is the Gate for us not because of what we do or think; Jesus is the Gate for us because we are his sheep. Flawed, needy, wonderful, beloved sheep.

Just like the first disciples, baffled by this parable, it might take a little while for this amazing reality to sink in. That the God who created everything, whom we worship, who knows us embarrassingly well...this God chooses us so that we can have life and have it abundantly.