

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

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, a Sunday called *Good Shepherd Sunday*. Every year today the prayers and readings remind us of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Across America, preachers are talking about sheep, or perhaps about their last vacation to Ireland or England. They are talking about how sheep learn to hear the voice of their shepherd, and to follow him where he leads them.

Here for us, this Sunday takes on a second meaning because it is also the annual celebration of our parish, named in honor of Christ our Good Shepherd. So with that in mind, I want to begin with a different image from much closer to home: tulips. Lately I have felt like we live in the Netherlands with the tulips everywhere.

Tulips are beautiful, of course, but they fascinate people because tulips know when to open in the morning and close at night. I suspect you have been watching them lately, as I have been, watching them open and close. The tulip, and its mysterious opening

and closing, is actually a wonderful image for us to ponder on this Good Shepherd Sunday.

Today, our Good Shepherd reading comes from the tenth chapter of John's gospel, where Jesus does not actually call himself the Good Shepherd. It ends just before Jesus calls himself by that name. I suspect we can hear how Jesus is working toward that, but today's gospel reading presents us with a different image. He says that he is the gate for the sheep, and that through him we come in and go out and find good pasture. Not the Good Shepherd, but the Gate for the Sheep, who knows when it is time to open up in the morning, and who knows when it is time to close up for the night. Now when you see the tulips opening and closing, you can think of this metaphor of Jesus as the gate for the sheep.

That, of course, was part of a shepherd's job, to know when to open up in the morning and when to close at night. Shepherds in Jesus' day, we think, slept at night by lying across the opening of the pen, acting as the

gate themselves, keeping sheep in and predators out. That is probably what Jesus had in mind when he said this, imagining himself as the gate who guards the coming in and going out of the sheep.

So the obvious metaphor is that Jesus is the one who cares for the opening and closing... which is what he means when he says he is the gate. But the second point is a bit subtler: Jesus doesn't actually say that he is a gate; he says that he is a door. That is what John's gospel literally says: he is the door for the sheep. English translators probably translated the word in John's gospel as *gate* instead of *door* because we imagine animal pens to have gates and not doors. They aren't so different; in his day houses and sheepfolds must have had doors. But I want to make a point that Jesus says, "I am the door." This is important because, in John's gospel, this isn't the only story about sheep and doors.

Remember another sheepfold, gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem on the night before the Good

Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. They were gathered in, safe and secure. The Shepherd took off his outer garments and began to wash their feet. They ate and drank and celebrated the life that they shared inside that sheepfold, until the Shepherd was struck and the sheep scattered. He led them where they didn't want to go. I suppose they wondered why they couldn't have just stayed there forever. You and I know that the Shepherd had to bring new life to the world, but they didn't yet understand. I suppose they wondered why they couldn't have just stayed inside that beautiful sheepfold forever. Sometimes that is what it means to be a sheep: just wishing we could stay in the sheep pen forever.

A few days later, the message that death could not hold him brings us to another room—a room that mirrors the first—and the same disciples are huddled in fear because of the news of his resurrection. This time John's gospel tells us plainly that the doors were locked. The sheep are afraid and this time, believing themselves not to have a shepherd, and they have

locked themselves in. We might say they missed the point of why Jesus said that he was the Door, but there they sit... hiding in fear behind locked doors.

And so the one who once called himself the Door for the sheep comes through their locked doors and stands in their midst. He offers them a gift of peace and of comfort. He offers them life on the other side of locked doors. Have you ever needed life on the other side of locked doors? And with that he leads them out. He leads them out, as he once promised he would when he said that he leads his sheep out. Perhaps this time they understood the metaphor. Those first disciples, gathered in a room behind locked doors, had life waiting for them outside. So the one who was the Door pushed them out of the sheep pen they created for themselves so that they may be what he had intended them to be.

It occurs to me that there is actually a connection, not just between the image of Jesus as the Door and his disciples hiding behind locked doors, or even of him

as God's holy tulip, knowing when to open and when to close, but also as he says—in our gospel reading today, that he leads his sheep out—then later in the gospel, he sends them out of that locked room.

The bringing out of sheep, the flowering of the tulip, the sending them out... I think it is all the same. I have realized that this word, "leads out," that Jesus says he does for the sheep, it is a pretty strong. It is an intentional word. It is the same word John uses when he says that Jesus casts out demons. It is the same word John uses when he tells us that Jesus took a whip and cast out the moneychangers from the Temple. We hear this word when Jesus speaks of driving out the ruler of this world. It is the word that John uses to talk about how Judas ran out of the Last Supper.

All of that is to say that, in the gospel, "going out" of the sheep pen is always more than a gentle push. I think it is safe to assume that the Good Shepherd doesn't cozily "nudge" his sheep out of the fold. No,

he pushes and leads intentionally, so they will move to a place where they will find and give life! It is easy for us to imagine Jesus as the one who welcomes us in, but this, too, is what the Good Shepherd does for us. He welcomes us in, and then he pushes us out purposefully and intently.

I suspect that there are always sheep that remain happily behind locked doors. There is safety in the sheepfold and inside the pen, and that safety is always alluring, but life abundant requires us being pushed out through doors that give us life. Jesus said, *I am the door, and some days you will be pushed out through it in order to find life.* And ever since, well-meaning people have used the Door as an excuse to keep others locked out, though I suspect they have missed the point. The Door isn't only about getting in, but also about being pushed outward toward life.

Have you ever needed life on the other side of locked doors? That is where our shepherd leads us.

Let me finish with a story about one of our children. It is my child, though I share this story generously, because it is about all of our children, one of the best things at Good Shepherd.

Six years ago tomorrow I witnessed something that changed my life forever. It was the day Ella was born. I felt horror at the brutal, primal nature of childbirth; it was awful! It amazes me that we came into the world that way, for reasons that still seem impossible to understand, that our mothers still loved us afterward! I don't know if men could be that forgiving.

Well this came to mind as I read this text from John, how Jesus said that the job of the Shepherd is to drive out the little sheep, to push them out of the place that protects them, into the world where they are meant to find life. And it is true: out of the warmth and safety of our mothers' wombs, we experience a brutal crossing over, a casting out of the sheepfold, and we come into this world waterlogged and tender and helpless. And while I found this process to be brutal, I also came to

see that, for every little sheep huddled inside the warmth and safety of its shepherd's pin, the pain of being pushed out is the only process that leads to life.

My beautiful Ella, like all of our children, couldn't stay in the sheep pin forever. Staying inside would have meant death for all involved. On the outside there was life waiting for her. We are all people who have been pushed out of comfortable places because God has life waiting on the other side of locked doors.

John's gospel says that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. And it says that he is the Door for the sheep, opening and closing like the tulips of Massachusetts, knowing instinctively to bring life. And to this image, John's gospel adds that he pushes us out, from behind locked doors back out into the world, because it is there, he says, that his will for us lives... it is life. It is life that is more abundant.

Have you ever wanted life outside of locked doors?