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The Good Shepherd
John 10:1-10

1 *"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.*

2 *The one who enters by the **gate** is the **shepherd of the sheep**.*

3 *The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep **by name and leads them out**.*

4 *When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they **know his voice**.*

5 *They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."*

6 *Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

7 *So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, **I am the gate** for the sheep.*

8 *All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.*

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

10 *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

11 *"I am the **good shepherd**. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Isn't that what we all want?

Especially right now, during this COVID-19 pandemic?

What does ABUNDANT LIFE **look like for you?**

Jesus tells this story right after he heals a **man born blind**—giving him abundant life.

The disciples see the blind man and ask Jesus—

who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

And Jesus says neither—

this man's blindness is to show the work of God in his life,

and then he heals the man, who had previously been a beggar on the street.

But the **Pharisees**, the religious leaders of the day,
 decide to investigate this healing by Jesus,
 because it was done on the Sabbath.
 They say Jesus can't be from God,
 because he's working on the Sabbath.
 They all argue about this healing, and completely miss the point—
 Jesus has brought him new and abundant life,
 by restoring his sight and his place in the community!
 Jesus finally comes back to the man, and tells him who He is,
 and he tells the Pharisees that they are the ones who are really blind!

This whole story of Jesus as the Gate and the Shepherd
 is **addressed to the Pharisees**,
 the ones who are not bringing abundant life to their flocks,
 the ones who cannot see the new life that Jesus offers,
 and who need it themselves.

This story about the gate, the sheep, and the shepherd is meant to explain
who Jesus is, and what he does.
 Jesus ends up using different metaphors for himself in John 10,
 saying both **I am the Gate, and I am the Good Shepherd**,
 maybe because they don't seem to understand what he's saying.

The question for us is, **do WE understand?**
 Do we understand who Jesus is, and what he does for us, as a Shepherd?

Who is Jesus for you? Especially right now?
 How do you **listen for the voice** of your Good Shepherd?
 What helps you listen to his voice, above all others?

I think this is so important us right now---**to learn how to hear Jesus' voice.**
 We are surrounded by so many voices, everyday—
 giving us all kinds of information, good and bad.
 So, how can we **tune our ears** to the voice of Jesus?

What if we look at this story?
 Sheep **listen** to the shepherd's voice,
 because they've **spent so much time** with their Shepherd.

And, they ***trust His voice***—
because he has led them to green pastures, still waters,
safety and protection.

What if the same is true for us?

The more time we take to ***pray, worship, read, walk, and just be*** with
Jesus—the more we ***know His voice***.

And we ***trust His voice***—
because we know He has blessed us with what we need.

So—how can you ***tune your ears*** to the voice of the Good Shepherd?

What can you do?

How are you making time for ***worship***?

For ***prayer***?

For ***Bible study***?

Are you more ***visual***? Or ***auditory***?

Do you connect with God through ***music? Writing?***

just being ***outdoors*** in the beauty of creation?

In this time of staying home during the pandemic,
This is actually ***a perfect time to make some new habits***.
Life-changing habits!

And all the ***technology*** we have, can be exhausting and frustrating,
But it can also help ***draw us closer to the voice of Jesus***.

The Bible and devotionals are literally at our fingertips
on apps on our phones,

Or daily emails.

and we can watch worship anytime online.

These are ***gifts*** in the midst of a crazy time.

And they might just help us ***hear the voice*** of our good shepherd.

These images of sheep and shepherd,

the sheepfold and the gate,

they might seem a little removed from our lives.

But they would have been ***very familiar to people back then***

who saw sheep and shepherds on a daily basis.

Sheep were **valuable resources** in those times,
They needed a good shepherd.

Shepherds were actually low on the social ladder,
but they were vital to the culture and economy.
Their job was to keep the sheep safe and healthy.

Sheep are not the sharpest crayons in the box,
so they really depend on their shepherd.
Without the leadership and tender care of a good shepherd,
they can easily die from disease, starvation, or an attack by a predator.
Without the shepherd's care they can be stolen by a thief or bandit.

Sheep are also pretty goofy creatures.
If they fall down on their backs with their feet in the air,
that's called being 'cast down'—
an image that is found throughout the Psalms in the Bible—
and they need a shepherd to help put them upright,
or they can literally die in that position!

Sheep that see another go **off a cliff**... are apt to follow...right to their death.
Sheep that are not protected from pests or disease, they will perish.
And of course, there are the wolves and other animals who attack sheep,
unless the shepherd intervenes.

So how do the shepherds take care of the sheep?

Well, they use their **VOICE** to lead and guide them.
Sheep are smart enough to know their shepherd's voice—
so even if they are penned up together with many different flocks,
whenever their shepherd calls, they follow his voice.
Shepherds would often name their sheep and call them by name!

I think this is so significant because Jesus often changes lives
by **calling people by name**.
Remember when he calls Mary by name after his resurrection?
And Lazarus by name to raise him from death?

I wonder--***When have you heard Jesus calling your name?***
 Maybe not in an literal way—but in your heart?
 Or in the silence, or through someone else's voice?

In our part of the world shepherds herd from behind,
 but in the ancient middle east, shepherds ***lead*** the sheep.
 They ***go before the sheep*** to make sure the pastures are green,
 and the way is safe.
 They lead them to the best places for food and drink.

That's why ***Psalm 23*** says the Lord is my shepherd...I shall not want...
 he makes me lie down in green pastures,
 he LEADS me beside the still waters...

The shepherd would also have an ***enclosure*** for the sheep at night,
 where there was one way in and out, through a ***gate***.
 When Jesus says ***I am the Gate***, he's saying that he is the way—
 he is the way in and out for the sheep.
 He is the way of safety and security.
 If they go his way, he will keep them together.

The shepherd's job is to keep the flock together.
 A sheep on its own is a ***lost sheep***,
 Sheep survive together,
 And they rely upon the leadership of a good shepherd to stay alive.

All throughout the Bible you can find references to God
 as the Good Shepherd of the people.
Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar.

But several times, God the good shepherd is ***contrasted with bad shepherds***,
 kind of like Jesus the Good Shepherd is contrasted here
 with thieves and bandits.

In ***Ezekiel 34:2*** God says:
Ah, you shepherds Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves!
Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 3 You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves
*with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but ***you do not feed*** the sheep.*

4 You have **not strengthened** the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

In **Isaiah 56:10-12** God says, *The shepherds have no understanding, they have turned their own way, they **ignore** the sheep.*

In **Jeremiah 10:21** God is really blunt:
*The shepherds are **stupid**, they do **not seek** the Lord, all their flock is scattered.*

People back then would have heard Jesus' words, and understood the importance of a **good shepherd**, and **sheep staying together**, they would have known these **writings** about bad shepherds.

We know that **for sheep, abundant life** is green pastures, still waters, safety, security, and a trusting relationship with the shepherd by following his voice. But—it's also about life **in the flock, TOGETHER.**

Isn't that true **for all of us?**
Don't we all need to be led by Jesus' voice—
to **green pastures and still waters**—
Don't we need the **safety and security**
of knowing that Jesus is our Good Shepherd?

And don't we **need the FLOCK?**
The **community** of fellow believers---all of us doing life **together?**
Instead of life being all about me—**what if life is about US?**
What if doing life all alone
is kind of like a stray sheep—it means we are **lost?**

That's not what our world would say.
We are taught to pull ourselves up with our bootstraps,
to be individuals, making **our own way** in the world.

But as Christians, our calling is different.
Abundant life is life lived together—in community.

Community is ***taking on new meaning*** in this COVID-19 pandemic,
When we are asked to stay home, or social distance in public.

We are worshiping online now,
out of love for all of the people in the flock.
Staying home and staying apart is actually one way,
we are loving our neighbors right now.

But—***we are also staying connected*** in new ways in this time of distancing!
We are reaching out even more online, and on the phone,
in the mail or email, to care for one another.
We are sitting in ***lawn chairs*** in driveways,
so we can connect, from a distance.
We are ***taking walks*** outside,
and meeting people we didn't even know lived in our neighborhood!

I believe that the ***Holy Spirit is showing us new ways***
to love and care for one another,
and to be a part of the flock.

Reminds me of what ***Tolstoy*** once said,
"The only certain happiness in life is to live for others."

You know, it was ***life in community*** that Jesus always brought
to the lost and the broken.
When he ***healed*** people, he restored them to community.
When he ***fed*** people, it was in community.
His ***own disciples*** were his community day and night.

Listening to the ***voice of Jesus—it brings us abundant life.***
But not just abundant life for us as individuals—
abundant life for us as a community.
That is the ***Good News*** of the Gospel today,
And for that, all God's people say, Amen.