

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 6, 2008**

## **JESUS: THE GATE FOR THE SHEEP**

### **John 10:1-10**

Have you ever had the opportunity to watch a herd of sheep? They are interesting animals. When Theresa and I lived in Germany, we would occasionally get a glimpse of them, when a shepherd guided his flock across one of the country roads near our home. For city dwellers like us, that was a delightful experience.

There is a fascinating little book called *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. The author, Phillip Keller describes sheep from his point of view of a professional shepherd, a keeper of flocks. He says that these creatures are difficult animals that require more direction and care than all other livestock.

Keller says that sheep are creatures of habit. When left to themselves, they will keep walking down the same paths until those paths become ruts in the ground. They will graze on the same hills until the grass becomes a wasteland. Left alone they will perish. That's why shepherds have to move their herds; sheep won't find good pasture on their own.

Yet sheep are not indifferent to the opportunity for good pasture. Like any other beast, these animals want fresh grazing land. Keller says that whenever he opened a gate to a new field, they would get excited, kick up their heels and leap with delight. They simply need help getting there. They need a shepherd.

It is interesting that Scripture often speaks of us as sheep and God as our shepherd. We read that in the Twenty-third Psalm. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*. At the top of your bulletin is a verse from Psalm 95: *We are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care*.

Like sheep, we need guidance. Like sheep, we want to lie down in green pastures. If we are not cared for, if we are not led to good pastureland, we will not survive. We need a shepherd.

This week and next, we will look at John chapter 10 and consider how Jesus Christ, as our shepherd, cares for us and leads us to good pasture. With everything that has gone on this week, with Pastor Smith in the hospital and our own concerns, I think we need to know about God's shepherding.

Please follow along as I read from John 10:1-10 (p. 759).

### **THE CONTRAST OF THE SHEPHERD TO THIEVES**

John 10 is a favorite passage for most believers. It draws a sketch of the loving care that Jesus brings to the people who belong to Him, those who are the sheep of His pasture. It is a warm and endearing image. But the words of this chapter are not spoken in a peaceful setting.

Jesus is talking to a group of hostile religious leaders called Pharisees who are upset because He healed a poor blind man. The story about this unfortunate beggar is in chapter 9. It goes like this:

Blind since birth, he stationed himself at the entrance to the temple in Jerusalem, hoping to get a handout. When Jesus saw him, He had compassion and restored his sight. The man was once blind, now can see and he gives glory to God and all the credit to Jesus. He learns Jesus is the Savior and he puts trust in Him.

Now the Pharisees are upset. These leaders of Israel lost another one to Jesus . . . and they are angry. They excommunicated the man from worship in the synagogue and they thought they slammed the door of God in his face.

But the Good Shepherd had rescued this lost sheep and He used the occasion to teach them and us about false shepherds.

He uses a figure of speech. In those days, most villages and towns had a common sheep pen into which all the local shepherds would bring their flocks at night. The sheep pen had high walls for protection, a sturdy door, and a gatekeeper who was hired to watch over the sheep. The most important job for the gatekeeper was to watch for thieves and robbers, who would try to climb over the wall and steal the sheep.

Every morning, when the shepherd came for his sheep, he would report to the gatekeeper for admittance into the community sheepfold and then call for his animals.

Sheep from the different flocks would be mixed together, so only by calling them could he be sure to get his own. He would call out their names, names like “Tenderfoot,” “Long-ears,” or “Stubby tail.” The sheep recognized the sound of the shepherd’s voice and knew the names they were called, so they would come to him. The gatekeeper, if he was any good at his job, knew that sheep respond only to their own shepherd and was confident that the sheep were not being stolen.

It is with this figure of speech that Jesus denounces the Pharisees and shows them they are false shepherds. *I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.*

A thief was one who took property by cunning or stealth, while a robber used violence to get something he wanted. They were dangerous fellows, concerned for their own selfish interests. They were more about fleecing the woolly beasts than nurturing or guarding them. Unlike the true shepherds, they had not slightest thought about the needs of the sheep.

Jesus slams these Pharisees. He knew they were the unbelieving pastors and teachers of the day, the ones who led people away from Himself. They placed themselves in authority over the people. They asked others to reject what He taught. They were false shepherds because they came not to give life, but to steal. . . and kill . . . and destroy.

The Lord’s judgment is not only against the Pharisees, but against all false religious leaders. Those who preach a way of salvation by good works or religious performance or the paying of money – any way other than faith alone in Christ – are thieves and robbers out to fleece or kill the sheep.

Today false shepherds preach tolerance for evil and sin but will not tolerate the Bible. They tell us that the Lord’s teaching isn’t really true. They minister for personal gain and twist and turn what the

Scriptures say, just to attract followers. These thieves and robbers promise good pastures but have no idea what the abundant life is all about.

Let me give you just one example. The so-called “prosperity gospel” teaches that God promises good health and material wealth to everyone who trusts in Him. One popular preacher tells us that God wants you to live your best life now and blatantly defines the Christian’s experience in terms of self-esteem, financial affluence and radiant health. Another has a list of “Believer’s Rights” that promise physical well-being free of disease and discomfort, lots of money and worldly success, and positive answers to every prayer we utter.

One of the great concerns about the “prosperity gospel” is that it teaches that difficulties such as illnesses, financial setbacks or relationship problems are all because of a lack of faith. They teach that we can speak prosperity and health into our lives simply by claiming the blessing.

They are reluctant to speak about sin and the need to find grace at the Cross . . . because talking about sin is depressing. They say that telling people to admit they are sinners injures self-esteem and hope. If our circumstances are difficult, if we suffer, if our prayers are not answered the way we expect, it is only because we have a negative attitude. Confession and asking for forgiveness almost never enter the picture.

Friends, that is false teaching and that kind of doctrine will lead to destruction. People who soak themselves in those views, more often than not, fail to embrace the Cross. The teachers of prosperity are not concerned for your spiritual welfare; they are out for their own financial gain. They are thieves and robbers.

### **THE CARE OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD**

The Bible doesn’t teach that the Christian life is free of sorrows or sickness or difficulty. It says that trials are part of God’s fatherly plan for growing believers into maturity, for producing love, and for building godly perseverance and hope into the lives of His people. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 5:

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us (Rom. 5:2-5).

This week, all of us will suffer in some way. Most of us not very much. But some will struggle desperately with illness or pain or heartache. We will pray for our loved ones and friends – those who are sick, in financial need, or in prison. We will cry out to God to heal our pastor.

But we cannot conclude that the Good Shepherd has forgotten. We should not believe that we have missed out on green pastures because we have difficulties. No, suffering is given to us by the Lord so that we might know His love. Trials are given to the sheep so that we know the care of a Good Shepherd.

False teachers want us to believe something else and they are out to steal and kill and destroy.

The Good Shepherd is a true shepherd. He doesn't remove the sheep from the challenges of life. He cares for them. How do we know that? He has an enduring and faithful relationship with them. Thieves and robbers are only for the moment; they want only what they get from the sheep right now. Shepherds are in it for the long haul; they take care of their sheep no matter the cost.

By talking about a relationship with the shepherd, Jesus was saying that He knows us. He knows us and we know Him. Verse 14 says, *I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*

Jesus knows everything about us – our flaws and limitations, our weaknesses, our failures – and He still makes us His own. That idea is undeniable: *When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Rom 5:6,8).

Jesus knows us and even though we are stubborn, difficult, impossible sheep, He still has a relationship with us.

In this relationship, Jesus calls His sheep and He does so by name. Here we have a glimpse of the doctrine of election. The Father has given sheep to His Son, Jesus comes to the door of the sheep pen, calls out for His own and they respond. Those who do not belong to Christ ignore Him. In fact they run away from Him because they cannot recognize His voice. But His own sheep hear His voice and come.

Now hearing Christ call is not merely an emotional response at an evangelistic meeting. It is not joining the church or attending a membership class. It is a heartfelt conviction to what the Bible says about your need for forgiveness for your sins, and belief that Jesus, through His death on the Cross, is the answer to that need. If you have heard and responded to the Good Shepherd's call, you can be assured that He is leading you to green pastures.

The false shepherds, those thieves and robbers, would have you believe something different. They want you to think the abundant life comes from something instead of or in addition to a faith relationship with Jesus Christ. But they are wrong. They don't get it and Jesus tells them so in verse 6: *but they did not understand what He was telling them.*

### **THE GATE FOR THE SHEEP**

And then in verse 7, the Lord explains the story of the Good Shepherd by using one of those "I am" sayings, just to drive home His point.

Do you remember what Jesus meant when He used the expression "I am?" Speaking to Jewish people, He put together a couple of words – words that are not apparent in our English versions, but crystal clear to Jews. He spoke in a way that identified Himself as the "I Am," the ancient Hebrew name Yahweh or Jehovah, the one we translate in the Old Testament as LORD. Jesus used this expression to demonstrate that He was God.

Eight times in the Gospel of John, Jesus said "I Am." Seven of those times He added a divine attribute and then explained what He meant. This time, He says *I am the gate for the sheep.*

He shifts the meaning of the figure of speech a little, by reminding His listeners of another type of sheep pen, the kind found out in the countryside. These were not community sheepfolds that sheltered multiple flocks. They were simple enclosures used by a single shepherd to keep the sheep safe at night. It was nothing more than a circle of rocks with an opening where the shepherd would lie down while the sheep huddled in safety.

Let me illustrate how this worked. There was a Bible scholar named Sir George Adam Smith who tells the story of his encounter with a Palestinian shepherd early in the last century. Here's the account:

At night, the sheep were led to a pen with four walls and an opening.

Sir George asked the shepherd, "That is where they go at night?"

"Yes," said the shepherd, "and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe."

"But there is no door," said Sir George.

"I am the door," said the shepherd.

Sir George looked at him and said, "What do you mean by the door?"

Said the shepherd, "When the light is gone, and all the sheep are inside, I lie in the open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door"

This is the meaning of Jesus' words, "I am the gate for the sheep." Jesus was actually saying, "I am the living door. In order to get into the sheep pen, you must go through me. In order to go out to pasture, you must go through me. I am Jehovah, I am the Lord. I am the door. There is no other way."

Friends, there is only one gate. The Lord Jesus Christ. That is what makes Christianity different from all other religions. Other faiths want you to embrace a collection of spiritual facts they believe to be true. They want you to agree with religious leaders who claim to know the answer. But you can do away with the leaders – in fact, they are all dead anyway.

But Christianity is more than just a collection of truths about God. Jesus is the truth. Christianity is more than stories about someone who points the way to God. Jesus is the way. Without Jesus, you would have nothing. Our faith is all about Christ, the Shepherd who knows us and lets us know Him.

The gate is narrow. But the offer of the gospel is broad. It is given to all who will listen. Donald Grey Barnhouse tells the story of a woman, a church-goer, but not a Christian. She had been raised in a religious home and had heard about Jesus but did not understand that Jesus was the only gate to the sheep. Therefore, she never actually trusted in Jesus for salvation. To help her, Barnhouse said,

"Imagine that the cross has a door in it. All you are asked is to go through the door. On one side, the side facing you, there is written an invitation: '*Whosoever will, may come.*'"

You stand there with your sin upon you and wonder if you should enter or not.

Finally you go through the door and as you do, the burden of your sin drops away. You are safe. You then turn around and see written on the backside of the cross, above the door which you have now entered, the words '*Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world.*'

The woman understood and trusted in Jesus. She was one of Christ's sheep. She heard His voice and entered through the gate.

How about you? Have you stepped through the door? Have you entered eternal life through Jesus Christ?

In John 10, Jesus lists three benefits for those who come through Him, three benefits for those who enter through the gate. James Montgomery Boice calls these salvation, safety, and satisfaction.

First, we see that those who enter through Christ will be saved. We are saved from sin's penalty, the anger of God that separates us from Him and makes us His enemies instead of His sheep. Throughout our lives as Christians, we are increasingly delivered from sin's power. And someday, when we pass into God's holy presence through death, we will be saved from the actual presence of sin. Those who enter through the gate will be saved.

Second, those who enter through Christ will be safe. That's what He meant by going in and out. It's the thought of being at peace, being so secure, so well protected, that there is no fear in coming and going. The Good Shepherd has placed His body across the entrance in order to make us safe. At the cost of His life, we are secure.

Nothing in all of creation can separate us from God's purposeful and loving plan for our lives – not war or terrorism, not cancer, a stroke or a seizure, not a lost job or financial distress, not a broken relationship, nothing. Nothing will separate us from the love of God. Psalm 121 says *The LORD will keep you from all harm – He will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*

That leads us to the third benefit, satisfaction, finding good pasture. And that was a challenging feat in Palestine. The skills of a good shepherd were needed to find fresh grass for the sheep to graze. The Scriptures tell us that our Good Shepherd *makes us lie down in green pastures, He leads us beside quiet waters* (Psalm 23:2). That's what Scripture means by the abundant life. Jesus says that He came that you and I may have life, and have it to the full.

The abundant life is not a life without problems. That is what false teachers want you to believe. A full and abundant life is one of being led by the One who knows us by name. It means life that is full, overflowing, with grace that is more than sufficient for every need. It is a life of contentment and rest, even in the midst of challenging circumstances, because we have a shepherd

We can do that only when we know by faith that we are cared for by the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the only way to abundant life.

Phillip Keller tells us that shepherds get sheep to be content in the pasture only when they sense they are protected and cared for. It is impossible to get these dumb animals to lie down unless they first know the shepherd has provided for them. Only through the faithful care and leading of the shepherd, will the sheep see the pasture worthy of rest.

You see, if we want good pasture, we must embrace life through the Good Shepherd. We must have and cultivate a relationship with Jesus Christ. He is the only way to abundant life. That life is for all of us who have entered through Him by faith. All of us want salvation, safety and satisfaction. All of us want the promised green pastures of abundant life. Don't we?

But, friends, please don't seek that life through thieves and robbers who promise good pastures, but really plan to fleece or destroy the sheep. Their version of the abundant life is a lie . . . because they do not enter through the gate.

We must trust in the Good Shepherd. A growing relationship with Him, one that lets Him lead in the trials and difficulties of life, is the only way to good pastureland.

Jesus is the only gate for the sheep. He is the only way to abundant life.