



Sunday, May 3, 2020
Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter
Bishop Susan Goff

Psalm 23 and John 10:1-10

“I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

When I was a child, my Aunt Jo gave me a white porcelain figurine of Jesus in long robes, with long hair and beard, holding a lamb in his arms. I kept the figurine close my whole life, comforted by the imagery. But I have to admit that when I was a child I couldn't identify with it. I couldn't picture myself as that lamb, so calm, so docile, so content. I was too restless, too full of questions, too excited for adventures to see myself as a lamb in Jesus' arms.

Then my husband Tom and I went to Newfoundland soon after we were married and this child of the suburbs, who'd never seen sheep outside of a petting zoo, had her eyes opened. Sheep are crazy! They are stubborn and independent and ornery. Just look at the places they get themselves into! Risking everything for a bite of the grass just over that edge. There is nothing meek and mild about sheep. Turns out I can identify with the lamb in Jesus' arms after all.

I certainly do today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, nicknamed “Good Shepherd Sunday,” when the sheep say, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” The Lord leads me and guides me. The Lord gives me rest and quenches my thirst and takes away all my fear. Therefore I have everything I need. There is nothing at all in all the world that I lack.

Sheep don't seem to believe that they already have everything necessary, though. They don't seem to live with calm assurance that the shepherd will supply their needs. That's why they get themselves into such predicaments, risking life at the edge of a cliff to claim what's just out of reach.

We human beings don't usually seem to believe that we have everything we need, either. That's why we get ourselves into predicaments, risking health and happiness in our longing for something beyond the edge.



Jesus comes to us today in the middle of our predicament, in the middle of our restless longing to go beyond the edge of our own houses where we've been sheltering for weeks now, to get back to activities and groups. Jesus comes to us in the middle of our fears about our health, our economy and our church life with good news that we do have everything we need to live life fully.

And Jesus shows us that good news with an unexpected image. Unexpected because, although it's Good Shepherd Sunday, Jesus doesn't call himself a shepherd in our Gospel reading. Instead he says, "I am the gate for the sheep."

The gate of a sheepfold opens in so that the sheep can enter for safety and security and nourishment. Once the sheep have passed through the gate, the shepherd can protect them from predators and from their worst wandering inclinations. Life is good inside the fold.

That's why some Christian art imagines the gate as the gateway to heaven, where life is good. Jesus himself hints at heaven when he says, "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Abundant life, eternal life with Christ in the fulness of God's heaven, where we are held in Jesus' loving arms.

But that kind of life doesn't begin after we die. Eternal life isn't only for some future time and some distant place. God's heaven is already here. God's Kingdom is now, within us and among us, as Jesus said. It's not yet here in all its fulness. God's not done with us yet, but God's presence, God's goodness, God's wonder are already here, just waiting to be glimpsed.

And so the gate that opens to let the sheep in, also opens to let the sheep out. Sheep can't survive if they stay inside the sheepfold all the time. They need to get out to graze and run and be blessed by air and wind and water. Sometimes the shepherd needs to drive the sheep from the fold, as an act of love so that they can thrive.

Jesus, the gate, opens to welcome us in to the fulness of life with God. And Jesus, the gate, opens to send us out into the world to live God's fulness there, right in the middle of God's creation, right in the middle of the meaningfulness and messiness of relationships with other people.

Jesus, the gate, opens for us to come in and go out now, in this time of staying home and making sacrifices for people we'll never even meet. We may not be able to travel far beyond the doors of our own houses or the gates of our own yards, but we can share abundant life with others. From our own homes we can reach out and serve others

- Through phone calls to people who are lonely or anxious.
- Through sending old fashioned letters and cards in the mail.
- By taping messages of encouragement to our windows or fences or even telephone poles for those who walk by to see.

- By donating food or masks or money.
- By praying. Praying hard for those who are making difficult decisions right now, for those who are ill, for those who are on the front lines caring for them, for those who have died and for those who mourn them.

We can go out through the gate that Jesus is and on into the world, even now. Because love transcends all physical distances. Sacrifice knows no boundaries. Abundant life cannot be held down.

Even if we're as ornery and feisty as sheep in wild places, we have everything we need. God holds us and everyone, in powerful arms of love now and for all eternity. And that love will never, ever let us go.