

# *St James United Church*

Message for April 30, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Easter; Good Shepherd Sunday



“A Gateway into Abundant Life”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

John 10:1-10; 1 Peter 2:19-25; “Abundance” by Amy Schmidt

Have you ever read your bible and as you went along assumed you knew what it meant, then suddenly saw it in a new light? That happened to me as I reflected on the gospel passage for today. It felt like John 10:6 in our passage up until that moment, like I had been a disciple hearing Jesus’ analogy but didn’t get what he meant. At least I hope the flash of insight I had suggests I didn’t get it before, and not that it actually means I don’t get it now. You decide.

So, what was the insight? Well first a question. When you hear the “shepherd”, as in “The Lord is my shepherd” in Psalm 23, what, or should I say who, do you think of? Most Christians say Jesus even though the psalms are part of the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible, and so weren’t written with Jesus in mind. But we hear it as Jesus, in part because later in John, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” The portion we read stopped before that line, but knowing it’s coming, I usually feel confused as Jesus says the sheep recognize the shepherd who comes in by the gate but then says that he’s the gate. I question how he can be both shepherd and gate and in the past attempted to reconcile this in sermons with doubtful statements about the shepherd up in the fields sleeping across the opening of a sheepfold, even though, one, that’s not historical, and two, Jesus refers to a communal sheepfold with an actual gate. But this week I realized I have been trying to reconcile what doesn’t need reconciling. The shepherd is the same as in Psalm 23, God, ready to come and lead us into the pasture where we will find abundant life.

In that moment the reading made more sense, and aligned better with next week’s as Jesus says he is the way, the truth, and the life. I felt like I was brought back to the original text, before Greek-speaking Christians used “Lord” for Jesus as the exalted Christ and not just God. Now that made sense to them, intended as a way to say that God reaches out to us in and through Christ, but doing so has left many of us hearing Psalm 23 as about Jesus, looking for him in the rest of the Tanakh, and over time pushing him up into heaven and away from our very human lives, as one to be worshipped, a goal to reach. Yet here he reminds us that he is a gate, an image with wisdom in its own right, with the abundant life we seek available as we pass through him, and dare I say, seek to be like him.

We can experience this abundant life here and now, even when everything seems the opposite. This is what Peter suggests as he writes about the suffering of Jesus and how it connects with our own. Now at first, we recoil at what he says and rightly so, hearing only through our own context, hearing him say that people should put up with unjust situations, stay

in relationships where there is abuse and coercive control. Sadly, Peter's letter has been used to say just that when we need to do the opposite, to get out of those situations when it is safe to do so. But Peter had a particular reality in mind, that of enslavement, when an enslaved Christian may have been told to do something he or she knew they shouldn't do, like helping their master or mistress with worship of the household gods, and ended up suffering because of it. In that, they were joined to Jesus in his suffering.

To be clear, Peter didn't mean suffering for its own sake. He's talking about the cross and how Jesus absorbed our wounds so that we might be healed. We hear this as something he did for us but I wonder if Jesus does it with us, walking with us in our humanity rather than set apart as the exalted Lord. In this he models for us another way to be a gate in our spiritual lives, to not so much go through the suffering we unfailingly experience in our lives, but to let it go through us, to accept rather than resist it as we usually do. In this I gain some insight from Buddhism. In that faith tradition we're told that suffering is tied to the desire for something to be other than it is, to be either as it was or could be. But when we accept it simply as it is, we sit more spaciously with it. We realize too how much we cling to what we wish could have been or will be. We discover instead that when we accept what is, we are open to what is unfolding. In this we find fullness of life as we're attentive to the gift of whatever it is that will be and not just as we wish it could be. We mostly do this individually, but we can also do it together, like facing shared grief as a church, sad for friends no longer with us, disheartened at the lack of young families, worried for the future. But as we do this, open to our present as it is, we see the present with more clarity and so with God's grace can begin to see opportunities for new life, and so can discern how best to live into these opportunities together.

I find this also adds for me a layer of insight into the resurrection, Jesus coming as he did with his wounds, the disciples invited to sit with their grief and through that came to renewed life. That has been my experience. I've experienced my own degree of suffering, of hurts and losses, and I know I have needed to sit with my wounds, to acknowledge rather than to deny them. Here Jesus shows me how to be a gate like him, to remain open so that God as a shepherd can come to me, going ahead of me as I walk through the dark valley and helping me come to still waters where I can find new wisdom and strength to move forward. And Jesus also helps me, as he helps any of us, to be a gate for others, the suffering I have experienced keeping me vulnerable, open-hearted, helping me be present with compassion to others. In this God walks with them and brings them new life too.

In this he models how to be a gate one more way, inviting us to remain openhearted not just to each other but each moment. As we do, we discover fullness of life around us, present in a new person joining us for worship, in people we meet as we wander in our neighbourhood, as we pause to watch a child at play, listen to a bird, feel the wind on our face. In these moments, we realize we're joined not just to each other but the world, life always present like fragrance filling a room as we zest an orange. And suddenly we find that God did not just lead us to abundant life, but God is abundant life, found when like a gate we are open. May we be so. Amen.