

Theme: Modeling the Good Shepherd

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we are here because we respond to Jesus' voice; as we follow the Good Shepherd, help us to shepherd others, bringing the world to know and follow you, through your son, Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

The night after the Easter Vigil and before Easter morning, I had a dream.

Suzie and I were on a small commuter plane. There were two seats on either side of the aisle. I had the window seat and Suzie had the aisle seat. We were on our way to some kind of family get together. My mother was also traveling with us.

The early details of the dream I don't remember well, like the occasion of the get together. But my mother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration is coming up in a few weeks. I think we were over Wyoming or some place like that when the trouble began.

The plane began to pitch and roll violently. I was thinking first, how glad I was to keep my seat belt on. Then I had this scene that I guess only happens in dreams. I had a bird's eye view of the plane as it was going down. It had only one wing and the ground was coming up fast.

The next thing I was thinking was where everyone was. I knew Suzie was next to me and I concentrated hard on what seat my mother was in – the opposite aisle a few rows ahead, so I could get them out when we crashed. I then announced to everyone near by that the plane had only one wing. I don't why I said that. Remember, it was a dream. Maybe I wanted to let everyone know what they were getting into, just in case they didn't have the advantage of that bird's eye view I had.

The next thing I remember is that the plane is taxiing down a rural, paved road. I was wondering how we made such a miraculous landing. The plane then makes a sharp right hand turn onto another street. When it stops, there are houses on either side of the road, the white clapboard kind of houses. The people from the houses come out, curious as to why there is plane on their road. We exit the plane and I see my relatives. I am asking myself how

the pilot knew where our family gathering was to bring us to the exact location. As I see my relatives gather around the plane, I realize that they had already died and so we were dead, too.

That woke me up. I was curious about the dream and thinking that the alarm is going to go off at 5:30 and I better get some sleep after a very long week. I think I slept for a little while before the alarm went off. While I was getting ready, I thought about this dream and how I could use it in a sermon. So, here we are.

There is a definite purpose why the lectionary decision makers chose Jesus' teachings about the Good Shepherd for the Easter season. No matter what may befall us, Jesus calls and we answer. I was lost, initially in this dream. It took me a little while to realize I was in the sheepfold. Through loved ones, I heard the shepherd's voice. I followed the pilot, the Good Shepherd.

Today's gospel reading takes place right after Jesus restores the sight of the man born blind we heard this past Lent. Jesus is just finishing his conversation with the former blind man when a few Pharisees overhear him and ask Jesus if he thinks they are blind. Jesus tells them that because they claim to see, then their blindness remains. Then immediately after that, Jesus talks to them about sheep and shepherds. Jesus is not giving up on the Pharisees. For one thing, a few Pharisees are identified as followers of Jesus in John's gospel.

Though these Pharisees may feel like Jesus has falsely accused them of blindness, Jesus wants to continue to teach them. He wants to show them the way out of their blindness and a path to that goal is to be a good shepherd. Jesus says that anyone who climbs over the fence instead of going through the gate of the sheep is a thief. The gatekeeper recognizes the shepherd and allows the shepherd entrance to the sheepfold.

To grasp what Jesus is talking about, we need to know what a sheepfold is and what it looks like. Obviously, a sheepfold is where a shepherd keeps sheep. In Jesus' time and pretty much still today, a shepherd has a few sheep. A sheepfold was a square area built with a wall of rocks or other material. There is typically a nearby well. This is where the sheep were kept at night. There was some kind of opening to the sheepfold or sheep pen. Typically, there is no gate or door (unless the shepherd or sheep owner was

wealthy). The shepherd slept in the wall gap, making the shepherd the gate. This is why a thief would go over the wall and not through the gate.

The shepherd and the sheep have a close relationship. The sheep know the voice of their shepherd and the shepherd knows each and every sheep by name. The shepherd calls each one by name and leads them out of the sheepfold. Once all of the sheep are led out, the sheep follow the shepherd's lead, because they know the shepherd's voice. Now if the sheep hear the voice of a stranger, they will flee, because they do not know the stranger's voice.

Having heard this, the Pharisees had no idea what Jesus was talking about. They are not only blind, but seemingly dull. They have not heard the shepherd's voice and so they do not know Jesus. They claim religious knowledge, but are ignorant of God and God's will. Not only do they listen to the thief, but they become thieves themselves.

Jesus is the gate. Anyone who comes through Jesus will be saved. It is through Jesus that they will freely find pasture. A thief comes to rob, kill, and destroy. Jesus came so that everyone will have life and life to the fullest. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, loves his sheep. We trust Jesus and we recognize his voice.

Even though this is Good Shepherd Sunday, in this first part of Jesus' discourse about the shepherd, Jesus says explicitly that he is the gate, not the shepherd, though the shepherd can be the gate, also. A gate separates that which is outside from that which is inside. The gate controls who or what passes through. Jesus is talking about who is in and who is out theologically, morally, and ethically. Entrance into the sheepfold is granted to those marked with water.

The gate also swings the other way. Some of those who are in may end up on the outside. Most of these people self-select. They no longer hear the voice of the shepherd and wander out. Some are invited to leave. How do we determine who can stay in and who needs to leave? St. Paul warns us about receiving the sacrament unworthily. He also says things about having a clear conscience to be in the sheepfold.

If Jesus is the gate, how does the church act as a gatekeeper? Is the church a moral bastion? Or is the church a hospital for sinners? Is Jesus' role as gate to keep the church free of corruption? Or does God's loves extend to the lost sheep and welcome them into the sheepfold?

God's love extends to people close by and to those far away. There are sheep who do not have good pasture. There are sheep who do not have a nearby well. There are sheep struggling to hear the voice of the shepherd. These sheep I am talking about are children.

Today, everyone here has the opportunity to do their part as a good shepherd for a child who lives in extreme poverty. Just as Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we can model what that means in the world today, showing the world that Christians are serious in sharing Jesus' preaching through our deeds.

The children we have available to sponsor today are from two countries, Honduras and Burkina Faso. Honduras, because of our existing diocesan companion relationship and Burkina Faso, because of my visit there a few years ago and our support for a well project there, which is **done** and the children have a source of clean water.

For a little more than a dollar a day, you can make a huge difference in a child's life. Compassion makes sure your sponsored child receives an education, has food to eat, has clean drinking water, and medical care. We take these things for granted. In other countries many, many children do not ever get these things. (Story of woman in rural Burkina)

Compassion also has a new program to help women with neonatal care and post-birth care. This cost is less than sponsoring a child. It called Stories of Survival or SOS. In countries where child mortality is high, people like you are making a difference through Compassion. We have pregnant women available for you to help today.

Many of us already sponsor a child through Compassion. We are making a difference in a child's life, giving that child a chance to be a productive adult in the place where that child lives. What Compassion is doing is changing societies and countries, one child at a time. If you do not yet sponsor a child, please prayerfully consider doing so. If you already sponsor a child, would you sponsor another one?

Text: **John 10:1–10** (NRSV)

**10** “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.<sup>2</sup> The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.<sup>3</sup> The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.<sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.<sup>5</sup> They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup> So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.<sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.<sup>9</sup> I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.<sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 10:1–10). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.