4th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 4.26.26

John 10:1-10
"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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly…"

The thing is, the sheep gate isn't one the sheep would ever go out. It's one they only would ever go in.

No wonder the disciples didn't understand. No wonder they didn't understand what Jesus was talking about here. "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Because the sheep gate wasn't something the sheep would ever go out. It was something they would only ever go in.

You know the feeling, the feeling of "Wait, what?" You're sitting on the patio at the Heritage on Housatonic Street. It's a lovely day and you're enjoying being outside. And then you see a car take a right out of the Loeb's parking lot heading to Main Street. And it doesn't quite compute what you're seeing, you just know it's wrong. And then it comes clear: "This is a one-way street. You're going the wrong way."

"But, this is the Gospel of John," you say. "Isn't Jesus always confusing in the Gospel of John?" you say. And of course, you're right. It's almost never the case that Jesus according to John says something completely clear, plain and simple. It's almost always the case according to John that Jesus is obtuse.

Which is quite an accomplishment because this is a gospel narrative that has Jesus talking a lot. This is certainly the case more than in the Gospel of Mark, where he's mostly a man of action. It's even the case more than in the Gospel of Matthew with its Sermon on the Mount, and the Gospel of Luke with its Sermon on the Plain. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is remembered to have had a lot to say (he *was* the Word of God made flesh after all), a strong urge to get the disciples to *understand.* The mystery of existence, the in-dwelling presence of God, the abiding-yet-going-ahead movement of God, the fact of eternity to be sensed in this time-bound and embodied man who could work wonders but who didn't want you to get too fixated on those wonders–for they were but signs, mere things to signify a more astonishing truth: Jesus would speak to all of this. But as is so often the case in any of our use of words, the more he said, the more confusing it all seemed.

Because to speak of such things is to do so in several registers. Speaking plainly of what was going on in any given exchange–with his mother at the wedding in Cana, with Nicodemus under the cover of night, with the Samaritan woman at the well–he would also necessarily speak overtop of it all, with some greater understanding of the significance of it all. He was speaking outside the encounter and bringing something beyond the encounter in. He was speaking even beyond the text, as if to the readers of this text, to the hearers for whom and from whom this text was originally written.

Those hearers, as you might well know, were a community of exiles driven from their homes and villages, their synagogues and traditions. They'd come to believe in Jesus, after all–and so they couldn't stay. They'd come to believe that Jesus was the Word of God, indeed the revealed will of God, the very logic of this God who creates the world and all that is therein, with its beauty and good order, with its hardship and even violence, for its being not yet finished. They'd come to believe that Jesus was the completion of the creation, that he, as crucified, was poured out, this vessel once full of grace now made empty–all so the creation, now full of God, could come complete. The pall cast over all people lifted. The dark corners of this existence now flooded with light: Nothing come into Something come into Fulfillment and the all-in-all. All causes of mourning and crying and pain worked out, filled in, redeemed with God's astonishing power to save.

This all happened on the cross.

And it would have nothing to do with vengeance, seeking retribution..

It would have nothing to do with violence.

It would have but to do with return, an apparent victim of violence now come again, a victor over violence for having come bearing peace. “Peace be with you,” said the Risen Christ to the embattled disciples, to the embattled Johannine community, and indeed to the whole embattled, embittered world, every single one of us with some cause for resentment and for which to seek retribution. “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

And it would call into question the heart of their once religious practice, the acts of sacrifice that took place in the Temple.

This act of sacrifice: the idea that if you kill something properly, you will be saved; the idea that if you kill the right one, offer the perfect one to God, you will be expiated from sin and made safe for another day: it had worked! It had worked for a long time, held more reckless violence at bay. But now these Jesus-believers: they were calling it into question.

Of course, the religious rites of sacrifice in the Temple were a far cry from the more primitive acts from which they evolved, and which they aimed to tame. They put a frame around the otherwise berserk acts of violence done in the name of safety, the reactive stonings or killings that promised, if unconsciously, to save–or at least to make safe.

It’s hard for us to imagine believing such a thing. We live in a society so advanced and so massive, and our violence is way more removed from our daily lives. We tend not to live enchanted to the act of killing as possessing the power to save. (The prosecutors of the Iran War notwithstanding.) But time was, when societies were smaller, just a few families or households, and when the interaction of societies one to another was more immediate and therefore possibly threatening, the spilling of blood took on near magical power. To put a dynamic to rest, to put a worry at ease, to subdue or cast out an alien unknown: it’s even supposed those altars, those piles of stones that dot the landscape of the earliest stories of the Bible are places where a stoning happened, to honor what resulted from this terrifying murder, the stunned calm that ended the disturbance, the stunned calm that brought rest.

Something sacred had taken place.

It was indeed a holy place.

Build an altar, an altar over the body, this murder-turned-sacrifice.

Religion was in this way essentially violent; what we moderns would call religion was essentially violent, the word itself we've given it breaking down thus: re-*ligio*. Indeed, its Latin root gives us also ligament, the anatomical thing that binds bone to bone, and ligature, a thread or cord or wire that binds any one thing to another. This is to say that, at its heart, religion is the thing that promises to bind, to produce social bonds; and at its best these are ties that bind in love, with an inner core but no outer boundary. But often that binding means also excluding, an outer boundary cast hard and fast. Often, to bind one people together means to cast other people out.

And in this way, religion is essentially an act of violence exercised collectively against an alien other, against a threat that seemed practically other-worldly. Religion, which is a term imposed on all those practices of social binding, were often but sanctioned violence committed to save from spontaneous violence, the sort much more difficult to get back under control. And its effect was powerfully to reestablish safety, security, and collective wellbeing.

And then it evolved.

And as it did, the acts of killing became more and more ceremonial, and less and less resulting in dead people, rather now resulting in dead animals at the hand of a priest at the place of an altar in the court of a Temple on the high point of a city that was itself confessed to be the center of the world.

Further evolution would have these animals used for sustenance, a holy meal for a holy people–the priests at the altar and assigned to live in the Temple now to make a meal of the sheep who'd been brought for slaughter. It's not unlike a Thanksgiving turkey we might enjoy, though our enjoyment tends not to include a mystical idea that this turkey has become sacred through our slaughter of it. But that's not to suggest we're any more sophisticated than those of so-called primitive religion. It might rather suggest we're just more cynical, or happily ignorant of what death we've caused, happily ignoring that this turkey was once alive and maybe would have deserved yet to be. For all our advancement, for all our growth, we're still hopelessly intertwined with violence that saves, violence that safeguards.

Hopelessly–if slightly less so.

The sheep gate was one physical feature of this ever-growing ceremonialism, the sheep gate through which sheep intended for the altar of sacrifice in the Temple would enter–and through which these sheep would never leave.

So, again, what was Jesus talking about here?

It was a privilege, I imagine, an honor to have such a sheep, to have raised such a sheep. Because not just any sheep would qualify to serve as a sacrifice. They had to be "spotless and without blemish," meaning they had to have come from a flock overseen by an attentive shepherd, an especially attentive shepherd. I imagine it was with pride, and maybe even with hope for big payment, that these shepherds would lead these spotless sheep to the city, lead them up the Temple mount, wash them in the pool of Israel there by the sheep gate, and then at last lead them through the gate—this gate through which such honored sheep would go in but would never come out.

But, listen: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." So, no wonder the disciples didn't understand. But the people of John's community? The people for whom this gospel was written, and indeed from whom this gospel was written? They had already been led out.

Of course, by the time this gospel was written, the Temple had already been destroyed, and its practices had already ceased to be. Really, no one was engaged in the so-called sacrificial mechanism that promised, and in important ways effected, social calm: the sacrificial mechanism, the sacrificing of the right one, or the deserving ones, or the helpless ones, a mechanism that did in real ways establish security and what can pass for peace. Peace! (except for the ones sacrificed. But we don't need to worry about them because they're not here to question its rightness. Right?)

No one was doing that anymore, by the time this gospel was written. So, I guess it had been eradicated, right? The doing away of the bad ones to secure life for the good, the exploiting of the happily deserving ones so the higher born can have their lives of ease. No one was doing that anymore, or at least not in any formal way, ceremonial and somewhat dignified.

But that doesn't mean the urge had been eradicated. It only means it might rather have been unleashed, let loose to run the world.

Joni Mitchell has a song from later in her career. “Passion Play,” it’s called, from a 1991 album I listened to habitually in college but never realized was about the passion of Christ until I got to divinity school. Duh. A recurring line presses upon us the question which Mitchell seems to think was itself unleashed at the crucifixion: “Who you gonna get to do the dirty work when all the slaves are free?”

Because they shall be free, the song seems to insist. They shall be free, those who are doing the work we really don’t want to do, the song seems not even to question. Really, if we pursue this discipline of walking in the way of the Risen Christ, the slaves shall be free, the exploited shall be released, the ones we would think we are rightly casting out or killing off or leaving behind in the name of progress or political expediency or national success or practical good sense or just the way it is: they shall be free.

And yet will remain the toil of life, the work yet to be done, the cleaning up after the party, the pulling of turnips and mining of cobalt and scrubbing of toilets and washing of aging bodies and caring for the people whose lives have come apart. Who are we gonna to do all that?

When the song was first in my life, and I was still in college, I had romantic ideas about how to do it. “You just make a big chore chart, and you rotate through the tasks, like at summer camp.” But then I learned a little more about recent history, and how political experiments in social engineering played out, what tended to happen when societies aimed to make all work seem equally appealing, equally dignified, the sorts of things any of us would really enjoy doing, given the greater good. But these societies, whether small cults or enormous turned-prison-states, tended to enact again the same old tragedy, but in disguise. A powerful elite would establish itself and the sacrificial mechanism would be pull-started and made to run again.

So, capitalism, right? Let the market decide?

It is a discipline to walk in the way of the Risen Christ. It is a discipline to organize your life around the promised impossibility that the sheep gate is one through which we not only go in for slaughter but also one through which we go out for green pastures and still waters and a restoration of soul. Because, on the one hand, we are none of us getting out of here alive. And, on the other hand, we are all of us getting out of here alive.

Which living we might aim to start today–and not only for ourselves but for others as well. Because we either none of us deserve lives of blessing, or we all of us do.

The disciples didn't understand what Jesus was talking about–didn't then understand the what of it, and likely now don't understand the how: how do we do this? How? But the aim is enough for me this morning. The aim that good enough isn't good, the conviction that worldly justice is rarely just, but that tinkering our way into that kingdom of the perfectly just, the absolutely good, the life abundant for each and all is an enactment beyond what we might perceive. This is a matter of faith, the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen, and for now the evoking of it, the calling it forth, the invoking of it, the speaking it into this room that we shall live in its midst right now, this revealed will of God that will not submit to our seeing what's what and who's who: it shall do.

Thanks be to God.