

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide  
5.3.20

### **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.<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. (221)

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. The fourth of Eastertide always is. I don't know why. I don't know when this came to be the case. Most things in the church year have a long history as to how they came to be, not to mention a long list of fellow travelers who rejected them. Almost everything about Christian practice has controversy attached: what is central to one sect will be rejected by another. Good Shepherd Sunday seems to be the one exception: I can't find who introduced it as a practice or when, and I can't find any aspects of the church that reject it or celebrate it at some other time. Catholics, Evangelicals, Mainliners: we all seem to celebrate this rather anodyne day, Good Shepherd Sunday, and always on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide, a seven-Sunday season.

Weirder is that none of the readings for Good Shepherd Sunday are resurrection narratives, which you might assume would make up the Eastertide readings, stories of Jesus now risen. It's Easter, after all, for seven Sundays. And, there is a story of the risen Christ that would be a good fit for this Sunday—that one when he, resurrected and returned, was impressing upon Peter the necessity of feeding his sheep. "Feed my sheep," he told Peter three times, echoing the three times Peter denied Jesus while Jesus was in being questioned by Pilate and prepared for crucifixion. In this exchange, Jesus, now risen and imploring this well intended but not (as of yet) so reliable follower Peter, "Feed my sheep," seems to be likening his followers to sheep and therefore himself to a shepherd. But this reading never falls on Good Shepherd Sunday, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide. It's always on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Eastertide in Year C.

Go figure.

As for what readings we do hear on Good Shepherd Sunday, it's always one drawn from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, a rather long discourse of Jesus playing with imagery of shepherds and sheep, wolves and thieves, folds and gates and pastures for grazing. This 10<sup>th</sup> chapter is divided into three parts and spread across the three liturgical years. This year, being Year A, features the first third of that discourse.

It's also the most confusing one. Here we get the sense that Jesus is a shepherd, yes; but not just that. He is also the gate, and perhaps as well the gatekeeper.

As it happens, this imagery is not mere metaphor. This is all real. Sheep and shepherds, of course, are real, no less now than then. Sheepfolds and gates are also real, and to protect against predators like wolves. You know all this.

More to the point, though, there was indeed a sheep gate near where Jesus was spinning this series of parables. He was in the Temple as of now, near the pool of Siloam. This I know because he'd just healed a blind man by mixing his own spit with some dirt to make mud to rub on his eyes, and then had told the blind man to go wash in the pool of Siloam, which he did, and from which time he could see. Next to that pool was the pool of Israel where sheep would be washed just prior to their being ushered through the nearby Sheep Gate. This was their way into the Temple where they would be sacrificed as offerings on the altar. They would go in through this gate, but—and here's the funny thing—I don't think they would ever come out.

It makes you wonder, then, what Jesus was talking about here: "I am the gate; if anyone enters in through me he will be saved, and he will go in and will go out and will find pasture."

I imagine it was a privilege, an honor. Not just any sheep would qualify to serve as a sacrifice. They had to be "spotless and without blemish" so to serve. I imagine it was also a boon for the shepherds who discovered such a sheep among their flocks. I imagine it was with pride, and maybe even with hope for big payment, that they would lead them to the city, lead them up the Temple mount, wash them in the pool of Israel and guide them through the gate—this gate through which you go in but (and here's the thing) I don't think through which you ever came out.

So, this is where the real flies off into fancy and fantasy. This is where it all becomes (don't you think?) mere metaphor. "To this man," goes Jesus' story, "the gatekeeper grants entry, and the sheep hearken to his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

Would the first hearers of this parable have been puzzled by this? Would they have been curious about how this might be, that the very sheep brought as payment for ransom for a fallen world, currency in the economy of God for the management of a sinful world, would not proceed further into the Temple, from sheepfold to seller's market to altar before the priest? Would they have wondered about this apparently other option, that they be led back out?

I'll tell you one thing, the Pharisees to whom Jesus was addressing these shepherd parables didn't think much of him. "He has a demon," many of them concluded. "He is deranged. Why do you listen to him?" they asked, addressing his disciples presumably.

And it is pretty fantastical. This notion that any economy could ever run without someone being sacrificed: it's pretty fantastical, especially as regards those who've been raised to be sacrificed. Because really, the whole purpose of keeping sheep at all was that they would serve in some useful way—either at the altar as a sacrifice without spot or blemish or more commonly simply as supper. That's what livestock are for—they are *for* some particular use, they aren't just *for* themselves. They don't have intrinsic worth, they have extrinsic worth—and some more than others, I suppose. Not being a shepherd myself, I can only guess there are sheep whose wool is especially wooly and sheep whose wool is subpar, there are sheep whose mutton is especially rich and sheep whose mutton is scrawny, not to come to much. There are sheep worthy of the altar for sacrifice, and there are sheep you just take out back, behind the barn. So, this notion that any shepherd would ever simply lead the sheep out to find pasture, out beside still waters: it is demented. That's simply not what sheep are for.

How now do you feel about being likened to sheep? I mean, what are *you* for? What purpose do you serve? Especially these days...

We're got a fight for our lives ahead of us in Lenox. As the congregation traverses through its 251<sup>st</sup> year together, we find ourselves in a dwindled state. About nineteen in worship on any given Sunday, it's a different feel than we've got nineteen for worship in Monterey: there are many more empty pews in Lenox, not to mention other chairs here and there, even some folded ones in the back as if just in case. Plus, there's recent memory of who used to sit in those pews. They're gone now.

Meanwhile, almost everyone remaining, faithfully so, is devoted to some task of keeping it all going—many doing so late into their retirement from most other responsibilities in life.

Congregationalism is a polity that demands a lot of its members. There's no one out there who's going to save us as far as practical matters are concerned. There's no diocese to decide upon our fate, to grant us funds, to send in fitting leadership when the previous one has gone, or to fold us into a partnership we don't really want. It all comes down to the people in the room—to make those decisions, to embark on that discernment, to raise the money, which (let's be clear) is serious money. Every \$200 task we take on turns out to be a \$2000 task—and that's before you even get through the door. (Those repaired front steps are going to be very nice, though.)

But even while the congregation dwindles, perhaps into oblivion, there is as ever the plain reality of the building. The capstone of the village, it is a witness to the history and heritage of the town and region, the quintessential example of New England architectural beauty—the restrained sort, the thrifty sort. The meetinghouse, white marble slabs, white clapboard siding, symmetrical and stout, a self-denying vanity, it's on every pamphlet you see, every guidebook to the Berkshires you flip through. Its likeness has been spotted on crafts for sale in Chicago, in an art museum in Houston, not to mention on every wall of every room down in the chapel. Keeping this up—in some ways literally, keeping it *up*—is an enormous responsibility resting on the shoulders of a few people who, like the prophet Zechariah was 2500 years ago, are prisoners of hope. What choice do they have? What choice do *we* have? A responsibility to the neighbors and town, a responsibility to our forebears, not to mention to Bill Goessel who two years ago this month left the congregation a small fortune for living up to this responsibility, it's all like a challenge grant.

Are you up for the challenge?

All this said, the building is put to its purpose, not merely as evocation but actually as vessel for worship and community, but four, five hours a month.

Relatedly, since I accepted the call to serve as pastor, the most common response about my news that I get from people outside the congregation is this: “Oh, that's such a beautiful church. I've never been inside.”

As one of our more devoted members said following a particularly sumptuous evening together one Sunday, while darkness settled into the sanctuary and the Advent candles flickered in their lovely witness to a not-yet-dawning light in the world and Charlie played the precious organ and this few of us embarked on a favorite carol all to the pleasure of but this few people: “This is very decadent.” So was her conclusion of the outlay of wealth, from the heating oil that kept us

warm to the two-thousand-year tradition that paved the way here, this resplendent outlay for such modest intake: decadent.

How can we justify further investment into this? How could anyone? The world is so full of need these days...

Well, that's been my watchword lately: decadent. So, I heard that like a starting gun at a race.

I've recently finished Jacques Barzun's movingly told story about the last five hundred years of Western culture, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to Present*. In it, Barzun makes it clear that decadence isn't a moral judgment, it's a social or even physical condition, a condition of decay, when progress and breakthrough and risk-taking and renaissance (which is to say re-birth, re-nascent) coil back to become securing and protecting and guarding against. It unfolds amidst the urge not to change, as if not changing were possible, as if change weren't the only constant. But once a body vows not to change, then decay sets in and takes over the process of change—for there will be change, there will *always* be change, now it will simply be change you don't choose.

Then, amidst decadence, time functions like a merry-go-round, or a misery-go-round as the case may be. There's no forward movement, no progression, no deepening or broadening or bearing up to new heights.

It reminds me of the carousel in Pittsfield that's come to such disappointment. So much hope was invested in it—that it would be beautiful, sweet, a real attraction with real appeal. The location of it is one problem, depending on who you ask. The other problem, a deeper problem, if you ask me, is simply that a merry-go-round is only going to be fun so many times. Eventually, you, or your kids, or your grandkids, are going to want to do something else, and most likely to do something that involves actually *doing* something.

The church is not a merry-go-round. The church is *not* a misery-go-round. Though we do indeed go round (and round and round) the liturgical year (year after year), though we do indeed move as ever from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Good Shepherd Sunday, this most anodyne day, which I always sort of dread because what new word will there be to say about this most anodyne day until, lo!, some new word arrives in my heart and on my tongue, the church is not a merry-go-round. We go around, and by this we go deeper and broader and to ever higher heights. There is repetition, and there is renaissance, re-nascence, re-birth.

Or that is at least what there *might* be, what we *might* do—birthed out of the decadence that otherwise sets in like rot eating away at even the most beautiful of historic buildings.

See, decadence relies on the (at least implicit) assertion that there is no God, that there is nothing beyond the imminent frame in which there is just an over and over recycling of things. There is nothing above and beyond the roof of the world, which is starting to feel like a dropped ceiling, beneath which we merely manage, beneath which our best hope is to manage well. There is nothing to surprise us, nothing to charge us, no source from outside this ever-tightening frame that will grant us new hope, to say nothing of new life.

Decadence relies on the deception that there is nothing new under the sun, that there is no transcendence interrupting the evermore predictable immanence, that there is just a rehearsal of what's worked in the past, a replay of old hits, a nostalgic retreat into what we've been told once was and should be again. All frontiers explored and conquered and exploited, there is now but an eternal return, until at last our time is up and we head through that sheep gate or (let's be honest) out back, behind the barn.

That's the best we can hope for—to be someone else's supper, a bit of coin in this transaction that is distraction. That's what we're *for*. Therein lies our worth, not intrinsic, just extrinsic. Ours is just to keep the wheel turning, to keep this economy of things rolling along, a merry-go-round on good days, though a misery-go-round for more than a few of us.

That's where we are as a society: get back to work! That's where we are as a church: don't bother for are you really worth all that?

I'm going to fight for Church on the Hill, as steadily though quite a bit more pressingly as I have for Monterey, because I think there needs to be a realm in Lenox, as in Monterey, where people may enter in, though to the effect of going out. I want there to be a public stand, a visible place into which any and all can go that has the effect of being led out—wherein the purpose we serve is to love and be loved, wherein our justification for being is because God is being and has made us so to be.

And I know there are other churches in Lenox, and they are faithful in their stand. Unlike in Monterey, there are other public witnesses to this alternative economy wherein the currency is free-flowing grace and utterly appealing love. But the Church on the Hill was the first to go public with this project in the incorporated village of Lenox, the village founded in 1767 and the church

gathered in 1769. And this comes to me as too powerful a mandate to give up on now, too compelling a commissioning to quit. In a world full of so much insistence that what we're for is all in our doing, our accomplishing, our managing, our transacting, our participation in an economy that grinds on and on, I want there to be a congregational stand that what we're for is simply being—our beloved, astonishing, wonderful, strange selves being each and all in God who is being. “I am that I am,” God introduced himself from that storied burning bush. “I am being,” a sustained and sustaining dynamism that attracts with its own surprising, reassuring appeal.

Yesterday, the Trustees in Lenox approved funding for a grant writer to see to the historical preservation and liturgical renewal in our building. Our first order of business will be to establish our story, to tell our “why” in such a way as has appeal.

This will be fun. Lenox, get ready. Monterey, cheer us on.

Thanks be to God.