

Grace and peace to you all from God – our hope and our redeemer – Amen.

This Sunday we leave behind Jesus post-resurrection encounters to focus our attention on the abundant life Christ promised his followers. And the first narrative we come to hear this message through is the story of the shepherd, the sheep, and the gate.

When we first hear this text, it may strike us as a strange story to jump into during this Easter season.

Its message isn't the clearest for many of us today – and as we hear in the gospel reading – it was also just as confusing for Jesus followers back in his day.

While an understanding of sheep, shepherds, farm infrastructure, and animal husbandry might help us appreciate this passage more – what I think will aid us in understanding it today, is placing it back within its original context.

The telling of this story about sheep, shepherds, and gates comes directly after Jesus miraculously heals a man who had been blind since birth.

Back in Jesus day, it was believed that if you were born blind, if you suffered from an unknown condition, or if you suddenly became very ill – you were in some way cursed, sinful, or damaged, and as a result you would have been marked as “unclean” by the pharisees or religious leaders. Which meant you would have been sent to live outside the walls of the city – until you could prove to them you have been made well.

Now one day, as Jesus was passing into town, he came across this man who has been blind since birth.

Which meant that since this man was a young child, he had been abandoned by his family, his friends, and his faith community to live alone at the gate of the city's walls – begging for his very means to survive.

Hearing this man's pain, and his deep wish to be welcomed back by his family again, Jesus heals him, restoring his sight, and sends him into town to be examined by the religious leaders.

However, when the healed man returns to town to show the Pharisees that he had been made well – no one would believe he was truly the “unclean” boy they had sent away all

those years ago! And so, the religious leaders refused to welcome him back within their community – instead choosing to call him a sinner, driving him away to their city’s gate again.

Now, at this time, the Pharisees were known as the *Shepherds of Israel*. They were the ones who had been entrusted to keep watch over God’s people, to care for their needs, and to teach them how to be a community of God’s people in this new land.

Yet, in the case of this blind man who had been fully healed, they had failed to act as God’s Shepherds, and Jesus rightly calls them out for it! Naming them thieves and bandits before their people.

And while this story happened so many centuries ago - sadly, even in our lives and world today, we know what it’s like to come up against people and boundaries that keep us from fully thriving as God’s beloved children.

Whether it’s the powers in our world that would tell us that unless our lives are profitable, productive, or in some way meaningful – we no longer deserve a prominent voice in our community.

The norms of this society - that would tell us - unless we blend in, don’t rock the boat, or go along with the status quo by putting others down to prop ourselves up – we won’t ever get ahead in this world.

Or even the systemic ways many women, people of color, people living with disabilities, transgender individuals, and other minorities face acts of violence, intimidation, and hate for simply living out the truth they were born to proclaim.

We have all come up against boundaries, forces, and people in our lives that are anything but life giving.

So, why would Jesus choose to call himself our gate – if that image of a boarder or boundary may not be the most comforting for many of us today?

It has to do with the fact that Jesus is attempting to reclaim the role of the pastoral protector of God’s people through this healing miracle and metaphor.

Jesus truly acts as the good shepherd – using his gate not as a tool of exclusion, oppression, and pain – but as one of protection, for the care and sake of the many sheep within his community.

Jesus chooses to heal the man who had been born blind – no matter the risk to his person or ministry. And when he finds out that the man has been thrown out from his community again, he cares for him, he grieves with him, and he welcomes the man into his community of followers - proclaiming once and for all that this man is a beloved child of God – with a full and abundant life ahead of him - no matter what others might have to say.

Because abundant life in the gospel of John isn't about some future heaven or life after death. It is about the very life we are living as followers of Christ – knowing that Jesus – God with us – will never leave or forsake us as we live and breathe here and now.

As we heard in the words of the 23rd Psalm at the beginning of our service today - we know we can trust in the voice of the good shepherd who truly cares for us even during our most difficult days.

And we can trust as those who have come to hear the shepherds voice that we too know how to care for one another – as the shepherd has cared for us.

I saw a post on social media this week that I think perfectly captures this very thought and teaching in our present time – and it went something like this:

*“And then the whole world walked inside and shut their doors and said we will stop it all. Everything. To protect our weaker ones, our sicker ones. Our older ones. Our most vulnerable. And nothing. Nothing in the history of humanity has ever felt more like love than this.”*

Even in the midst of our isolation, our worry, and grief we continue to find expressions of this love all around us.

So, may we continue to hold the course - protecting one another in love. May we care for one another as Christ has cared for us. And may we continue to listen for the voice of our good shepherd – leading us in ways of hope and peace, even in the midst of these troubling times.

And may this be so among us – amen.