

“The Sheep Gate: Faith and Humility”

John 9:1-12, 10:1-10

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1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

This fall Bill and I are preaching on the great “I AM” sayings in John. These are some of the best known texts in John. We have heard “I AM the Bread of Life” and “I AM the Light of the World.” We will hear “I AM the Good Shepherd” and “I AM the Way and the Truth and Life” and “I AM the True Vine.” And then there’s the powerful “I AM the Resurrection and the Life.” All strong, clear invitations to believe spoken by Jesus.

But today is a little different. Today is “I AM...the Sheep Gate.” A “sheep gate?” It doesn’t seem to have the GRAVITAS of the others. It’s like me hearing years ago “I drive a Ferrari,” and “I drive a Corvette,” and “I drive a Porsche.” And then I speak up and say “Well, I drive a...minivan.” It just isn’t as “sexy” as the other “I AM” sayings. But it is an “I AM” saying. So the “Sheep Gate” must be important for John. Let’s take a closer look at this “minivan” and see what it might mean. And to do that I’m going to do a more didactic or teaching type sermon.

II. Context

The books of the Bible originally had no chapters and verses. Chapters were added in the 13th C. Verses were added in the 16th C. This made reading and referencing material in the Bible much easier. But it also created breaks in the text that were not originally there. And so paying attention to literary context, what comes before and after a passage, matters. And that is especially true with the text today.

What comes before the “I AM the Sheep Gate” text is John 9. And it’s important to know that John 9 and John 10 go together as one story. The story read earlier in John 9:1-12 is a healing story. But it’s also more than that. In the story a blind man is healed. It’s clearly a miracle because the man has been blind from birth. Jesus clearly would seem to be filled with the power of God. But there’s a problem. The healing happens on the Sabbath. And miracles are work which you can’t do on the Sabbath. So the question comes up, “Who is Jesus?” Is he the miracle worker with the power of God? Or is he the Sabbath breaker who does not follow the way of God? Who is Jesus?

So an inquiry, a type of religious trial, is set up with the Pharisees. First the man who was blind testifies. All he knows is that he was blind and now he sees. Only someone with the power

of God could do that kind of miracle. It's a testimony. Simple faith. Next his parents are "put on the stand." They testify that this man is their son, that he was born blind, and that now he sees. But they don't know how it happened. So the man who was blind is brought in again. And again he tells his story. But by now things are getting "testy." Arguments break out. Some of the Pharisees see Jesus as a sinner who breaks the Sabbath. Others see Jesus as some type of miracle worker with the power of God. The whole situation then explodes when the man born blind has the simple courage to suggest the Pharisees might want to become Jesus' disciples. And by now we know that seeing and blindness have also become a metaphor for belief and unbelief in Jesus. Who really sees and who is really blind?

So that brings us to our "minivan" of a text. Amidst the blindness and seeing, unbelief and belief, who is Jesus?

III. Text and Brief Exegesis

The text is on a bulletin insert in a helpful outline. **Read John 10:1-10.**

The story has clear parts to it. In vv. 1-5 we have a parable; two parables really. And this is the only place in the whole Gospel of John that we get anything that looks like a parable. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we get lots of parables. But not in John. This is the only one. And it's really two parables put together. Or sort of "mashed together."

To understand the parables we need to understand a little about shepherding in ancient Israel. At night the sheep would be brought into a small pen or corral. The pen could be in the middle of a field or by a house. The walls of the corral would be piles of stones. Briars would be put at the top of the stone wall. The wall kept the sheep in and the predators out. And there would be a gate in the stone wall. And sometimes a shepherd, or someone hired by the shepherd, would sleep lying against the gate as a type of guard, just to keep the sheep even safer.

The first parable is about the gate. The point is that those trusted with care of the sheep, the true shepherds, enter by the gate. The gate keeper lets them in. Others are kept out. And those who try to enter by any other way are not true shepherds. Those who climb over the rock wall have evil intentions. They are thieves and bandits.

The second parable is about shepherds. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd because the shepherd has spent time with them and cared for them. All the shepherd has to do is call the sheep and they follow. It is not true with strangers. The sheep will run from a stranger.

We then read that the people did not understand the parables that Jesus told them. Perhaps the failure to understand the parables was due to not making a connection with their lives. That happens. But perhaps they did not understand also because of an unwillingness to respond to the challenge of the parable. They understand what it means, but struggle to believe what it says about faith, life, and God. They struggle to "see" what it says about Jesus. So Jesus explains the parables to them.

“I AM the sheep gate.” Jesus explains the first parable. Jesus is the one who lets the true shepherds in. Jesus is the one who keeps the thieves and bandits out. Jesus is “the sheep gate.” He is the standard. He is the litmus test. He is the one whom shepherds are tested against. He is the one that faith and hope and life are measured against. Those Jesus keeps out are the false Messiahs and would-be Messiahs who claim they are from God. In Jesus’ day a number of religious leaders with political agendas said they were God’s Messiahs.

“I AM the sheep gate.” And so Jesus also keeps out the priests at the Temple who believed faith in God was a business. And Jesus keeps out the Sadducees who believed faith in God was politics. And Jesus keeps out the Pharisees who believed that faith in God was a long list of religious rules. And Jesus keeps out, then and today, all who seek to use faith in God as a way to power and wealth and status. There are still many thieves and bandits.

“I AM the sheep gate.” And if we connect this to the healing story in John 9 we begin to understand that John is saying that those who do not see that Jesus is God’s Savior are truly blind and are kept outside. While those who believe in Jesus truly see and come through the gate. That’s what this is all about. What do you believe about Jesus?

And there’s even more being said here by John. As an “I AM” statement, John is saying that in Jesus we see the mystery of Holy God. Jesus is not just claiming himself as “The Sheep Gate.” Rather, God is declaring that Jesus is “the Sheep Gate.” The mystery of “I AM” is revealed in Jesus, and to believe Jesus is the Savior and Lord is to see the way and purpose of God. Who is Jesus Christ? “I AM the Sheep Gate.”

IV. Brief Theological Reflection

“I AM the Sheep Gate.” So there really is quite a bit going on with this “minivan” of a statement. It is declaring that God and faith and life all revolve around what you believe about Jesus. He is the standard. He is the litmus test. He is the revelation of God. And so don’t believe “would-be Messiahs.” And don’t believe those who use religion for political gain. And don’t believe those who use belief for financial gain. And don’t believe those who use belief for power and status. And don’t believe those who self-righteously think they have God all figured out.

Jesus is the Sheep Gate who shows “for God so loved the world.” Jesus is the Sheep Gate who does not condemn a woman caught in adultery, but rather announces God’s forgives and challenges her to live a new life. Jesus is the Sheep Gate whose love is not bound by religious rules, but heals blind eyes on the Sabbath. And any religious leaders who do not believe in Jesus and in the way of Jesus are bandits and thieves who do not enter the through the gate but climb over the wall.

That’s what this is about. What do you, and what do religious leaders, really believe about Jesus? And it’s about how to tell true leaders from thieves and bandits.

And I also wonder about this. Sometimes this text, and others like it, are used to say things like: If you don’t believe in Jesus you’re going to hell; and, if you aren’t a Christian

you're going to hell; and if you are a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Hindu you're going to hell. Is that really what "the Sheep Gate" means?

I don't think John necessarily had other religions or no religion on his mind when he wrote about "the Sheep Gate." Rather his concern was more about religious leaders who claimed the authority of God but whose belief and way of life was contrary to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The question is: How do you know if you can trust someone as a religious leader? John's answer is: Does she or he pass through the Sheep Gate? That's what this is about. Not who's going to hell.

And then there is this. I know people, and you may know people, who are Buddhist or Muslim or Hindu or no religion, who live lives of kindness and grace and generosity and forgiveness and hope. In fact they live more the way of Jesus than some of Jesus' followers. So what about them?

An old story helps me here. I find I think about it every once in a while. Really it's a type of parable or metaphor. Maybe it might help you.

Three blind men had no idea what an elephant was like. They had only heard about elephants. And they were curious. So one day a friend takes all three to a real elephant. The first blind man feels the elephant's trunk and says, "Oh, an elephant is like a thick snake." The second blind man feels the elephant's ear and says, "No, an elephant is like a huge palm fan." The third blind man feels the elephant's leg, and says, "No, you are both wrong, an elephant is like a pillar or a tree trunk." So an argument broke out about who was right. Finally their seeing friend said, "You are all right, and you are all wrong." And he then led them to feel different parts of elephant. The blind men were amazed. And they came to believe that the mighty elephant was greater than they had first known, and probably could ever know.

I often find myself as one of those blind men or like the blind man in John 9. I have come to know and believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. And what I know and believe I think is true. But what I know and believe is limited by my own experience and life and mind and soul...or my own "seeing." And the mystery of the holy God is certainly greater than what I know and believe. And so I humbly respect and listen to those raised in different cultures with different experiences in different religions. Just as an elephant is a trunk and more than a trunk, so God is who I know in Jesus Christ and more than I know.

I have heard a number of times that "the opposite of faith is certainty." The older I've gotten the truer I've found that statement to be. There's a lot of mystery to life and faith and God. So maybe, this "I AM the Sheep Gate" text leaves us with this: Faith and humility. Faith that Jesus is the Christ, "the Sheep Gate." And humility that God and the way of God are a whole lot bigger than my particular belief and understanding. Faith and humility. That seems right to me.