

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Easter (April 13, 2008) / John 10:1-10
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Sheep are not pets. We have to understand that to absorb the meaning of today's texts. Sheep are a part of a household's survival strategy. For the shepherd and family, the sheep represent wool and meat. A family's survival is intertwined with the survival of the sheep. This is hard to grasp for most of us living in suburban Maryland where we transact our daily business over phone lines and screens and our meat comes thankfully wrapped in plastic in the refrigerated section of the grocery store.

This summer many of our Rite 13 members will travel to Massachusetts where they will spend a couple of nights at Heifer International's Overlook Farm. It is a trip designed to raise their awareness of global hunger and to inspire their commitment to ending the disaster of hunger in their lifetime. They will feed camels and goats. They will barter for food and prepare their dinner. They will sleep in simple structures that mimic the type of shelter found in rural Mexico and distant Thailand. I pray that they will return to tell us how critical sheep and other animals are to the survival of families around the world who live on the very edge of survival. I anticipate that they will gain a new sense of how many families and their animals live in an interdependent way.

I have a different sense of how families live interdependently with their herds after watching a film called "The Story of the Weeping Camel."¹ This beautiful National Geographic film, "The Story of the Weeping Camel," takes us to the harsh but livable realities of the Gobi region in Mongolia. We enter the collapsible, round tent called a *ger*, which allows its inhabitants to move around the vast steppe as needed to find new pasture for their herds of goats and camels. The most important spot in a Mongolian *ger* is the fire, the hearth in the very center of this round home. The hearth is a place of refuge from the harsh winds and dangers of the Gobi region.

The family's survival depends on the survival of the herds. If they need rope, they cut some camel hair to weave a rope. For mealtimes, they milk the goats, and for keeping their fire burning they gather dried dung. They feed and protect the goats and camels. Their lives in this harsh region depend on the well-being of the animals they raise. They are emotionally attached to their goats and camels, in a way I know from how I love my pet dog, but it's much more than that. They live as interdependent creatures, herders and the herd.

Jesus uses this sheep and shepherd image because it expresses a relationship that was known to people who survived by raising animals—they would know the interrelated quality of this life, the mutual benefit that is possible for the shepherd and sheep. It is upon this understanding of the relationship between shepherd and sheep that Jesus locates himself. He says, "I am the gate." Not gatekeeper, manipulating the gate to control who comes and goes, but the gate itself. A gate is essential to gathering up the herd for the night. Imagine life for the sheep if there were no gate, no place to enter or exit the sheepfold. Poor sheep- they would be stuck in the sheepfold. Stuck

¹ "The Story of the Weeping Camel" © 2004 by National Geographic World Films, rated PG. "The Story of the Weeping Camel" is an enchanting film that follows the adventures of a family of herders in Mongolia's Gobi region who face a crisis when the mother camel unexpectedly rejects her newborn calf after a particularly difficult birth. Uniquely composed of equal parts reality, drama, and magic, this film is a window into a different way of life and the universal terrain of the heart."

in a place of containment and security. The sheep would get restless, and more than that, they would become anxious and even destructive. Sheep can be penned in for too long. Imagine these poor sheep stuck *outside* the pen, no gate allowing them to enter for the night. Stuck in the great out there, the sheep would be stressed and in danger and exhausted.

Can we identify with these poor stuck sheep needing that gate? I bet we can. We need the gate too, for access to the pasture in the morning and access to the sheepfold at dark. Penned in for too long in a safe place can get destructive for humans as well. And being stuck in the great out there when darkness falls upon us and dangers approach will find us stressed and exhausted.

According to a couple of researchers, human beings, like other creatures, have a genetic predisposition to seek out for their habitats those landscapes that are most conducive to their well-being and survival. Having spent 99% of our time on earth as hunter-gatherers, humans have acquired a predilection for landscapes that offer a high degree of what one researcher calls ‘prospect’ and ‘refuge’: places that offer good views –of potential food and danger- without compromising a sense of shelter. Humans have survived partly by finding space for pasture and for shelter.²

Refuge and prospect... Safety and pasture. These are the places we travel between, marked by the Savior space acting as gate to welcome us in for rest, and sending us out for exercise and nourishment. Jesus straddles refuge and prospect, both needed, both places where the shepherd may lead us if we listen to his voice. In Greek, the language that Jesus’ words were initially written into, the word translated in our version as “gate” sounds like *thura*.³ Which sounds to me like *through*. The Greek word *thura* can be used for door, gate, entrance, opportunity. I found that last choice very interesting: Can you hear the nuance of Jesus saying: “I am the gate, I am the door, I am the entrance, I am the opportunity.”


Jesus offers each of us individually and all of us collectively an opportunity- a way to the place we need to be – whether the prospect of new pasture or the refuge of a fenced in pen. Jesus offers us the opportunity we need to move into the spaces that God calls us to be. We know the voice of the shepherd, we must respond to where it leads us, through the gate of Jesus-opportunity to rest and safety, or through the gate of Jesus-opportunity to new adventures in sustaining our growth and survival as the sheep of the one true shepherd.

It is Jesus who marks the point of opportunity for us to have our deepest needs fulfilled. We need both prospect and refuge. We long for a safe place to huddle with others when darkness falls AND we long for the chance to be nourished in the fresh air, venturing out to new pasture periodically to stretch and grow.

Accept Jesus for what he tells us he is: the gate, inviting you in, inviting you out. Leading you into safety. Leading you into freedom, into wide open spiritual space.

Jesus says: “I am the gate. Come on through. Welcome.”

² See Michael Pollan’s “A Place of My Own” page 49, where the author refers to Jay Appleton and E. O. Wilson

³  *thura* (Strong’s 2374)