

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“..but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”

Man! Those Pharisees can be such sheep at times!

For that matter, so can we.

Jesus is giving them a perfectly good lesson on shepherding
and they don't get it.

Now why in the world wouldn't they listen to a carpenter
telling them how to be a good shepherd?

Oh.

Actually, we don't know that Jesus was a carpenter.

There is nothing in scripture that would verify that.

It is only tradition.

But Jesus does say he is a shepherd,
and a good one to boot.

But he says that in the next verse.

Not this verse.

OK, so what is Jesus trying to say in this verse?

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

In the section we heard today from the Acts of the Apostles,
we see a community,

the early community that would eventually become the church,
living together in what looks like an idyllic life.

Is that what Jesus was talking about?

Yes, but there is much more.

When Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John,

he doesn't use parables like he does in the other three Gospels.

He uses “I am” statements.

These “I am” statements are very deep in imagery and rich in meaning.

They are unique to the Fourth Gospel.

I think the author of the Fourth Gospel likes to use imagery

because it forces us to use our noodles,

to engage our brain and our heart...

to get ourselves involved in the story.

I think that may be why the mysteriously un-named “disciple whom Jesus loved”

plays such a big part in this Gospel.

It allows space for us to enter into the narrative

and become really present in the story.

We can see ourselves as that beloved disciple.

We can wonder what we would have thought and done in that situation.

OK, so let’s jump in,

really jump in.

What do we think all this means?

Look at the characters in this verse.

There is the sheepfold,

the gate,

the thief and bandit,

the gate,

the gatekeeper,

the shepherd,

and the sheep.

At first glance we might think that Jesus is the Shepherd,

the devil is the thief and bandit,

the sheepfold is heaven,

St. Peter is the gatekeeper,

the gates are pearly

and we are the sheep.

This works fine until we notice a few things,

like Jesus says he is the gate...

and the sheep come in and go out through the gate,

so the sheepfold can't really be heaven....

And also the bandit climbs into the sheepfold

and I have a difficult time

seeing the devil ever making it to heaven again,

even if he sneaks in.

So... let's back up and try again.

What do we really know?

We know that Jesus is the gate because he says so.

I think we can pretty much take for granted that we are the sheep,

we are almost always the sheep,

at least that seems to be a safe place to start.

At least we can be thankful none of us are the goats this time!!

That leaves us with the riddles of the sheepfold,

the gatekeeper,

the shepherd,

and the thief and bandit.

Let's start with the thief and bandit,

because I think that's the easy one.

Our first inclination, I believe, was a good one.

Thieves and bandits make their living by breaking and entering,

by getting around the gate, if you will.

Thieves and bandits undermine the work of the gate,

of Jesus.

That means they are more than the devil,

they are all those who do the work of the devil.

They work in the dark.

They pretend to be what they are not.

They are any of the thousands of different forces
that are at work to weaken our perception
of God's deep and abiding love for us,
and our ability to follow where that love leads us.

OK. So now we know who the enemy is.

That leaves us with the sheepfold,
the gatekeeper,
and the shepherd.

Jesus says that the shepherd goes ahead of the sheep
and leads them to good pasture.

Again, I think our first inclination here was a good one.

Not Jesus perhaps, but someone who leads through Jesus.

One might think a priest or spiritual leader, and that could work,
but I'm thinking bigger.

I think the shepherd is Holy Spirit!

I heard a story a while back, about a preacher
who, in responding to the passage of scripture about Jesus the good shepherd,
thought of himself as a sheep dog,

The faithful working companion of the shepherd,
responding to his commands
to help keep the sheep in line
and going where they should.

I liked this analogy because a sheepdog is a lot closer to a sheep than a shepherd.

Too bad Jesus, or John, didn't put a sheep dog in this story.

Anyway, back to the Shepherd.

Seeing the Shepherd as the Holy Spirit works on many different levels.

The Spirit leads us in our lives to places we may not have been to before.

Once we know the voice of the Spirit
we will follow regardless of the apparent risk,
just like sheep will follow their shepherd.

Well, that now leaves us with the gatekeeper and the sheepfold.

Let's take a shot at the Gatekeeper.

The intimate relationship between Gate, shepherd, and gatekeeper
is a clue I don't think we can afford to pass up,

and so you have probably already gotten to where I was leading you.

I see the Gatekeeper as God the Father,
the giver of the gate, Jesus.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son..."

It's not perfect, but I think it works pretty well.

And that, at last, brings us to the sheepfold.

What do we know about a sheepfold.

A sheepfold is a place where the sheep are safe and protected.

The sheep are brought there at night or in times of storm or danger.

They can be fed there, but not for long.

They can be watered there, but not for long either.

To be really well fed and really well watered,

to find truly abundant life,

they must risk leaving the sheepfold,

led by the shepherd, through the gate,

to good pasture.

Have you got it yet?

I think the sheepfold is the church,

not the building, per se, but the community of faith.

I opened this reflection with Jesus' statement,

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

It is the gate in the sheepfold that allow the sheep to leave for good pasture;

to be fed abundantly.

It is the love of God incarnate that allows us

to move beyond the safe and protected environs of the church,

our place of comfort and safety,

to engage the world in the Gospel mission,

Where our lives can be filled with abundance.

It is risky business, this quest for abundance.

And so we will need to return to the safety of the sheepfold regularly,

but the shepherd returns regularly as well, to lead us out again.

And in this going and coming, and coming and going,

we will find the life of abundance that God wants for us.

If there is a silver lining to this pandemic forcing us to be apart physically,

I think it is that it has shown us

that even though we are physically distant from one another,

we can stay together spiritually.

We are still the body of Christ.

We are getting to experience viscerally,

the truth that our buildings are not the church,

we are!

This is but one constellation of imagery that I could find

in the “I am” statement from this morning's Gospel.

But it's only one.

This being the Gospel of John, I have no doubt that there are many others.

I encourage you to put on your Beloved Disciple shoes

and root around and see if you can't find one of your own.

I assure you it will be time well spent.

The psalmist reminds us of the true power of living the abundant life.

In spite of all the troubles that can come to us in this life

we need not worry.

The abundant life brings comfort in the face of evil,
peace in the face of troubles;
it revives your soul.

This is the faith we seek!

This is the faith our hope promises.

This is why we follow the shepherd when he calls,
Through the gate and into the unknown...

That we may have life, and have it abundantly.

Amen.