

“The Shepherd at the Gate”

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¹Very 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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:1-10)

The gospel of John contains seven different “I am” sayings — times when Jesus explains a part of who he is with a metaphor that begins with the words, “I am.” Some of these you may be able to remember: “*I am the light of the world*”; “*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*”; “*I am the true vine*.” Of the seven, I would argue that the one we read today is the most obscure, the one that is recited and recalled the least. For example:

- Every time we celebrate communion, the presiding pastor is likely to recall in some way Jesus’ statement “*I am the bread of life*.”
- At every funeral, I make it a point to recite the claim by Jesus, “*I am the resurrection and the life... Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*”
- And when we read the most beloved of the Psalms, good old number 23, we remember the way that Jesus specifically drew upon the rich Old Testament tradition that saw God as the caretaker of sheep, saying to the crowd “I am the Good Shepherd.” Across the ages, these rich and enduring metaphors have inspired beloved poetry, rich theology, and some really great sermons about the nature of Christ.

But “I am the gate”? I just don’t remember spending that much time on this one. I cannot recall hearing any sermons on it. If I did, they did not stick. Maybe one reason for this is that, of all the “I am” metaphors, this one is kind of mundane. The Greek word Jesus uses just means “door.” Doors are helpful, but they just kind of hang there. They don’t do anything, really, unless we push them or pull them.

Maybe that’s why translators started preferring the word “gate.” Gates do the same thing as doors, but they tend to be a bit more memorable. For example, when I think of gates, I think of the Brandenburg Gate, the neo-classical masterpiece in Berlin, or maybe the ornate wrought iron gate of Buckingham Palace. And even more humble gates seem more poetic than a door. If your mind eye were to picture the gates of your life, you might see the weathered grey gate of an English garden flanked by boxwoods... or the gate in a white picket fence, with one of those cannonball weights that gently pulls it back into place after you enter. Gates are nicer than doors, but even gates may not be sermon worthy on their own.



Still, I wonder if there is a deeper, more subtle reason that we might avoid thinking of Jesus as “the gate.” A gate, by its very nature, stands at the boundary between “in” and “out.” A gate is a barrier that keeps someone outside or traps someone inside. A gate restricts movement and limits freedom. A prison has gates. Private clubs have gates. Gated communities have gates. The Brandenburg Gate is a glorious feat of architecture, but for years it stood at the literal boundary between East and West Berlin. Framed by rusted barbed wire and an ugly concrete wall, it was for decades a symbol of the mistrust and enmity of the Cold War. A gate can be a complicated symbol.

The stakes go even higher if we imagine that this particular gate stands at the entrance to heaven. Is Jesus talking about a pretty garden gate, or the actual Pearly Gates? If it is the latter, we might find ourselves thinking of Jesus as heaven’s bouncer, the guy standing at heaven’s door with an ominous clipboard in hand. Maybe our name is on the list; maybe it’s not. If Jesus is this kind of gate, there is a foreboding, intimidating aspect to this statement. In other words, it’s a lot more genteel and pleasant to talk about Jesus being bread, or life, or a pleasant grapevine, or a Good Shepherd who cares for all of us sheep.

Fortunately for us, that last one is critically important for our understanding of what Jesus really meant. In fact, when Jesus said, “I am the gate,” he only took a breath or maybe two before he also said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” Both of these “I am” statements are included in a single speech which is often referred to as the “shepherd discourse.” In other words, if we want to understand what it means to say that Jesus is our “Good Shepherd,” we need to think about the ways that shepherds act as gatekeepers. Likewise, if we want to understand what kind of gate Jesus is, we need to remember that the one standing in the doorway is not just anyone, but a Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep in a particular kind of way.

As it turns out, in Palestine, in the days of Jesus, there were basically two kinds of enclosures that shepherds used to shelter their sheep. The first kind of enclosure was found in cities and villages. These were pens with substantial masonry walls. Sometimes they even had wooden covers or roofs over them for added shelter and security. These pens had a door that locked, and one guardian had the key. If a shepherd or shepherdess came up and wanted to get their sheep in for the night, they better know that gatekeeper. If not, or if some prior arrangement had not been made, those sheep were not getting in.

But, in the warm season, the shepherds could wander farther from town, out into the countryside and upon on the hillsides of Palestine. Out there, the shepherds were pretty much on their own. They would try to find a cave or area bounded by boulders, and then gather together stray rocks, sticks, and branches and cobble together a makeshift enclosure. These temporary pens almost never had doors or gates. There was just an opening where the sheep could pass in or out. And when darkness fell, the shepherd would lay their body down across the opening so that anything that wanted in or out would have to go right over them. The shepherd would stay there all night, keeping watch. using his own body to keep predators out. The shepherd was, literally, the gate.

Either way, Jesus as the Good Shepherd is never the bouncer with the clipboard. In the first scenario, the enclosure with the locked door and the keeper at the gate, Jesus is the advocate who always stands with the sheep. If the lambs are not welcomed into the enclosure, the Good Shepherd will remain outside with them — to console them, defend them, and find safety somewhere else. In the second scenario, out in the countryside, Jesus himself stands at the door. His job is not to blame or judge the sheep. He is not checking credentials or cleanliness, because he knows them already by name, and they know his voice and they are able to trust him completely. No, his primary role is to stand in the breach and watch for danger. If bandits or wolves come to the door, he will offer his body as a barrier, and, if necessary, he will gladly lay down his own life for the sheep.

This is what it means for Jesus to be the gate, and what it means to be the Good Shepherd. The images are inseparably joined. This door does not have a tricky combination, or a secret code that we have to prove we know. It is a gate that swings wide with just the slightest push, held ajar by the

one who says "Seek this gate and you will find it. Knock and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7). And this shepherd is not one who will turn on his sheep. His love for us is so strong that, if even one sheep from the flock is lost or in danger, he will risk everything to seek out that lost lamb and bring it home.

Many you have probably heard the name Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and you may remember that she was one of the most famous psychiatrists of the 20th century, known primarily for her groundbreaking book On Death and Dying, in which she described five stages of grief. One of the stories Kübler-Ross would often share involved a little boy who had been battling leukemia for a long time. He had entered the final stages of the disease, and his doctors did not think he had long to live. The little boy seemed to know it, as well. Once an outgoing, gregarious little boy, he grew quieter and quieter, pulling farther and farther into himself.

One morning, as Kübler-Ross was sitting with the boy, she just couldn't get him to talk at all. So, she tried a different tack. She got out some paper and crayons and asked him to draw a picture of how he was feeling. He picked up his crayons and began to draw what became a terrible and foreboding self-portrait. The background was deep and ominous, with black thunderclouds in the sky. Below, on the ground, he drew himself with sad eyes and a grimacing frown. And off to the side, he drew a large cannon — a massive gun, pointed directly at his heart, poised and ready to fire a deadly blow.

When he handed the finished picture to Kübler-Ross, she did not say a word. Instead she sat down beside him on his hospital bed, picked up the crayons, and started to add something new to the portrait. She drew her own self-portrait, standing right beside the little boy. He could tell it was her — it was her hair, in her style, with the kind of shoes he knew she wore. For good measure, she added the white hospital coat she always wore. And then, to complete the image, she slowly drew her arm going around the little boy's shoulder, giving him a tight hug as they stood together at end of the cannon.

The next day, when she came back to check on the boy, he asked for the crayons again. Without being prompted in any way, the little boy started to draw another self-portrait. This time, the sun was shining. The sky was blue. He was standing in green grass with some flowers in it. On his face was a broad smile, and the cannon was gone. The threat of his disease was still as threatening as ever, but now he knew a loving presence was there to face it with him.

A gate can be a complicated symbol. If it is open, it can be a passage to safety and warmth. But if it is closed, and we are on the wrong side of that closed door, it can be dark, we can feel vulnerable, we may even worry that we could be lost forever. Fortunately for us, the one who stands at the gate of heaven is not a bouncer, but a shepherd. His goal is not to guard the door or protect heaven from us, but rather to be the door that keeps us safe — to do whatever it takes to protect us from harm, even to the point of laying down his own life for ours.

So, fear not. Even if we have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear. We will lie down in green pastures... we will be guided to the still waters... we will be led along paths of righteousness... because whatever may come for you and for me... the Good Shepherd is with us, and he has placed himself firmly between us and whatever may seek to do us harm.

Thanks be to God for the Shepherd in the Gate. **Amen.**