



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

I am the Gate. I am the Good Shepherd.

SCRIPTURE:
John 10:1-18

January 22, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Seven times. Seven times, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am...” and then finishes with a statement. We are exploring these seven statements and we started with Jesus saying, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Then, last Sunday, we heard Jesus say, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

Today we add two more statements. They are joined together because they come in the same conversation. Jesus is talking with religious leaders, priests, pharisees, scribes and his own followers. Jesus starts talking about a sheepfold. This would be a permanent structure like a corral with rock and plaster walls both to keep the sheep safe and to prevent them from escaping. If the sheepfold is a good one, there would be a permanent gate made of solid wood. The gate would be near the house or attached to it so the owner would know if anyone was entering the sheepfold.

Jesus says, “Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.” Then Jesus talks about the gatekeeper opening the gate and the shepherd calling for his sheep. They follow him because they know his voice.

I had read this passage for years, but it became clearer to me when I was a visiting scholar teaching at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut in Lebanon. I was at the school for three weeks. On my second weekend, one of the professors and his wife offered to show me the rural, northern part of Lebanon beyond Beirut. They picked me up early on that Saturday morning and we drove in their car north toward Syria. There are no interstate freeways in

Lebanon but there are smaller highways and country roads. We were passing through towns and small villages. The hills of northern Lebanon are beautiful.

As we were driving, we came upon a large sheepfold near the road filled with hundreds of sheep. The corral was made of metal fences. The professor explained that ranchers would build these sheepfolds and allow several shepherds to place their flocks there for a fee. It was a source of income for them. In the sheepfold, the sheep would be all mixed up. As the scene unfolded, I saw there were five teenagers standing just beyond the opening of the gate—three boys and two girls. The owner opened the gate to the corral and then the shepherds started calling. I turned to my friend and asked, “What are they singing?” He explained that they were not singing. They were calling the sheep by name in Arabic. As each shepherd was calling, sheep started to come out of the sheepfold in a line and each shepherd would start to back away from the gate and the sheep would follow. It sounded so beautiful. Arabic is a melodic language and it reminded me of the Adhan, the Muslim call to prayer.

Jesus said the shepherd “goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Then Jesus said (here it comes, the third ‘I am’ statement), “I am the gate for the sheep.”

So here is another thing I learned about shepherds. To lead their sheep to good pastures, they will walk for miles in a day. They have to prod the sheep along. Sometimes, they will walk so far to find food, that they cannot get back to the permanent sheepfold at night, so the shepherd creates a temporary sheepfold. He or she cuts branches from trees and sticks bushes and arranges them in a large circle. Then they call their sheep and lead them inside. Then the shepherd

lies down in the opening to protect the sheep. So when Jesus says, “I am the gate for the sheep,” he is saying that shepherds literally become the gate. They lie down in the opening to protect their flock. Anyone who want to steal the sheep has to get through them. Any predator who wants to hurt the sheep must go through them. That’s why Jesus says, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Then comes the fourth ‘I am’ statement. Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Do you see? Jesus says, “I am the gate for the sheep” because he lays down his life to protect us—that we might have life and not just life—but life abundant. And he says, “I am the good shepherd” because he knows us and claims each of us.

For years, our Nishioka family Sunday evening ritual was to watch together a television show titled “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom” with host Marlin Perkins. It was a show about nature and the wonder of God’s creation. This was before Animal Planet, the National Geographic channel and the Nature channel. One episode was about elephant seals. These are the largest of the seal family. They can weigh up to 10,000 pounds and be 20 feet long. They are called elephant seals because they have this large snout that looks like a trunk. The show was following a large colony on South Georgia Island located between the southern tip of South America and Antarctica. There were all these females on the beach, hundreds of huge elephant seals, who were ready to give birth. They call them ‘cows.’ Then it seemed like, as if on cue, they all gave birth to their baby elephant seals called ‘pups.’ I know. Cows have pups. I don’t understand it either.

While these cows were in labor over several days, they could not eat but now that they had their pups, they were famished. So in one moment they gave birth and in the next, they go into the sea to feed. So they leave hundreds of pups, who all look alike,

screaming and scrambling around on the rocky shore looking for their mothers. After the better part of a day, when the mothers have eaten, some signal tells them to all go back to the beach and you see this wave of elephant seal cows coming on to the beach and the pups are screaming and probably terrified that they are going to get smashed but miraculously they do not. Then you wonder how could these hundreds of mothers and these hundreds of babies possibly find each other? Two cameras focus on one mother and one baby and they are both searching and making seal noises. Finally they find one another. It’s a relief. Then Marlin Perkins explains that from the moment of her birth, that little pup, when she heard her mother’s voice, it was imprinted on her soul forever. And when the mother heard her baby’s first cry, that voice was imprinted on her soul, so of course, they would find each other because they knew each other’s voice—distinct from all the other voices around them.

Jesus says, “I am the gate.” Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” I know my sheep and they follow me because they know my voice. I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.

Elizabeth McKell shared this story with me and gave me permission to share it. She and Jay were visiting her mother, Janie Perrin Stevens Brown, who was 91 at the time, on hospice care and suffering with dementia. She was not very verbal, but she knew who Elizabeth was and who Jay was. Their visit was ending and Jay, being ever the good pastor as well as a fine son-in-law, asked his mother-in-law if she would like for him to pray. Janie indicated ‘yes.’ So, the three of them joined hands and before Jay could pray, Janie surprised them both and prayed, “Dear God, thank you for being with me all of my life.”

Jesus said, “I am the gate for the sheep. I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and they know my voice.” Janie Perrin Stevens Brown said, “Dear God, thank you for being with me all of my life.”

I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.