

**“Good Shepherd”
John 10:1-10**

Today we listen to the familiar passage which tells us that Jesus is the good Shepherd. Sheep, shepherds and sheepfold Jesus talks about in today’s Gospel Lesson were very common in the land of Palestine in Biblical time. They were an every-day, firsthand experience that was as familiar to the people although they are very unfamiliar to us.

Why were there so many sheep in the land at that time? What were they for? According to one source, sheep provided not just wool, but also meat and milk. Their horns were used as musical instruments or to hold oil. The skins were made into clothing and coverings for walls. So all parts of sheep were consumed and used for different purposes.

In fact, the most common occupation was shepherding, and one of the most common sights was of a sheepfold. Each night, a number of herds of sheep would be kept together in a single neighborhood pen, called a sheepfold. This was a small enclosure, generally with stone walls and a single gate. (p.p.) When the sheep were being herded through the entrance and into the pen, the shepherd would literally lay hands on each member of the flock. He would run his hands through their wool to make sure there were no injuries or burrs or other things that needed attention.

A designated gatekeeper guarded the sheep against the night hazards of weather, beasts and robbers. In the morning each shepherd in turn would come and call forth his own flock and take it out to pasture and water. The sheep recognized their shepherd’s voice and followed him. The best shepherds protected the sheep and knew where the best pasture and the best water was to be found.

Oftentimes, the doorway to the sheepfold didn’t have a gate or any other type of physical barrier, so after checking the sheep, the shepherd would position himself physically across the opening. He would literally be the gate to the sheepfold, placing his body where he could keep the sheep from escaping, and thieves, bandits, and animals that might do them harm, from coming in. The shepherd literally became the gate.

Sheep belonged to their shepherds and good shepherds took good care of their sheep.

The strong and beautiful relationship between shepherd and sheep is used to describe the relationship between the Lord God and the people of Israel in the well known and loved psalm, psalm 23.

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness of his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil. For though art with me.”

Jesus used the same metaphor of sheep and shepherd from the Old Testament, and said, “I am the good Shepherd. I am the gate of the sheep.” When he used the expression, “I am,” he equated himself with God.

Do you remember that Moses in the Old Testament met God in the burning bush and he asked God his name? God answered, “I Am Who I Am.” Then God said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: I Am has sent me to you.”

So when Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. I am the gate of the sheep.” He means that he is of God and he is the Shepherd and Gate for us, as described in Psalm 23.

Shepherds cared for their sheep because the sheep were their precious possessions. They took care of them well. Why is God described as Shepherd in the Old Testament? It’s because God chose the children of Israel as God’s people and made covenant with them. Right? They became God’s people and God, “I Am,” became their God. Because of the special covenantal relationship, just like a marital covenant, God loved the Israelites, took care of them and forgave them when they repented of their idolatry and turned back to “I Am.”

Why is Jesus our Good Shepherd? It’s because he loved us enough to offer his own life on the cross for us, his sheep, so that we could have abundant life. He said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (10:10)

What is “abundant life”? What is your image of “abundant life”? Is it having a nice house and beautiful yard -- plus a luxurious car, a gorgeous boat and even a lovely vacation house? Is your image of abundant life having a wonderful family and your children following successful careers?

A few months ago, I felt I was so rich and was filled with a sense of abundant life.

A few months ago, we were in the middle of the move from the former parsonage to the new one. My husband was still using an oxygen tank. He had to take a break at each step going upstairs. I was overwhelmed with the task I had to do. I said to myself, “Can we make it? Can we move out of this house?”

Many people came to pack almost all the items on the first floor: pots, pans, plates, dishes in the cabinets, ornamental items, pictures, carpentry tools, potted flowers, books, laundry items, cleaning tools, exercise machine. You name it...all. Items in the linen cabinet and medicine cabinet upstairs were packed by volunteers along with tons of books in both my husband’s and my study rooms. Some helped us remove pieces of furniture by dismantling it or taking them out to the curb outside. Many people gave us or dropped off boxes at our house. Somebody took out extra garbage to the dump in Yaphank. Another came to chop the fallen tree branch from the snow. People asked us if more help was needed.

Someone offered my husband a place to stay overnight so that he did not need to be in the middle of commotion and dust on the day and before the moving day. Lay servants took a turn to plan for the services and deliver a message to relieve me from that responsibility. I cannot list all the kind and caring acts and words I received with the move.

Looking at the packed boxes gathered in the living room, I said to myself. "I don't care even if some dishes arrive at the new parsonage broken, which didn't happen. I don't care even if all the boxes were lost somehow in transporting them from one house to another. People came to help us when we needed help. That's more precious than 'things.' " I had enough already. I felt filled with a sense of abundance.

You see, abundant life does not depend on how much we have, how many or expensive items we own, but it can be found in relationships—in the loving and caring relationships.

Yes, we are human. Relationships can be broken or tarnished. If we look for abundant life only in human relationships, we may get disappointed, broken, injured, hurt or even depressed.

"You will find abundant life in me," says Jesus, "In our relationship you will find it because I came so that you may have life, and have it abundantly."

Sheep know their shepherd's voice and are brought to a place of safety - green pastures, still waters and sheepfolds --when they listen to his voice and follow him. If they stray off, their good shepherd will search for them. Yes, there will be rain, thunderstorms and hailstones in the field and even in sheepfolds. Their shepherd, however, stays close to them, assuring them of his presence, comforting them and standing as the gate.

Jesus is our good Shepherd. May we find life abundant in the relationship he offers to us.