

Ah, Good Shepherd Sunday!
Just what we need, you may think,
a warm, fuzzy sermon to remind us that Jesus is
the Good Shepherd to comfort and lead us safely through
these unsettling days
Or, maybe you think, just what we don't need –
another sermon telling us we're stupid sheep wandering astray.

In either case, I'm about to disappoint you.
This Fourth Sunday of Easter may be known as "Good Shepherd
Sunday", but that's not what today's Gospel says.
Did you happen to notice?
It doesn't mention Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd.
That's in the verse that comes after this passage,
which means we'll hear it in church next year.

But in the passage we read, Jesus still makes quite a claim for himself.
He makes one of those revelatory "I am" statements
sprinkled throughout John's Gospel.
I am the bread of life (John 6). I am the light of the world (John 8).
I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 11).
And of course "I am the Good Shepherd" later in this chapter.

These are among the seven (a complete set, you might say)
sayings Jesus begins with the phrase "I am" –
which is supposed to remind us how Yahweh
first revealed Godself to Moses back in the Book of Genesis,

often translated as "I am who I am."

So what's the grand proclamation in today's passage?

"I am the gate."

Literally, it's "door" but in this context translated as "gate."

"I am the gate for the sheep," says Jesus; "I am the gate."

How many refrigerator magnets have you seen with that on it?

And yet that's where we are.

For what is a gate, a door, but a point of transition
from one place to another?

Isn't that where we are right now, and where we've been
these past seven weeks or so?

Not scurrying from one thing to another as usual,
but stuck in a state of uneasy transition from life as we knew it
into --- *what?*

We're kidding ourselves if we think we know exactly what new
place we're crossing into.

What we do know is that wherever we're going won't look
exactly like where we've been.

It never does. But how much more so now.

A (deceptively) simple sentence I heard this week sums it up:
"February 2020 is never coming back."

Of course we knew that.

But did we have a clue just how different March 2020 would be?

And then April, and now is it May already?

And if you think you know what June will look like, well, think again.

We're in an extended season of transition and uncertainty.
A threshold moment.
A time when if Jesus tells us he's "the gate" we'd better listen.

The fancy word for this is *liminal*.
A space betwixt and between.

Here's the Oxford Dictionary definition of this word, liminal:

1. Relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process; and
2. Occupying a position at, or on both sides, of a threshold.

Feels familiar to me.
As I speak to you in front of this virtual backdrop of the church,
I'm standing in my dining room surrounded by doors and thresholds.
My family room is there, the cellar stairs there;
I see my kitchen there.
As familiar as all this is to me, it's a little strange too.

The kitchen is now the gateway to my son's workspace,
this dining room is a makeshift chancel, conference room, and office.
Walking through these doors takes on different meaning now,
as I work, have Zoom meetings and lead worship
in a place I used to just eat.

It's transitional. A step in a process.
A foot on each side of a threshold.
Between how we used to worship – in church, together, with you,
then for a few weeks in church without you,
and now here.
Who knows what's next.

Yes, our goal is to return to church whenever it's safe, but
it'll be a while and things will be different when we get there.

We are in a liminal space,
 betwixt the known and unknown.
 between what once was and what is yet to come.
 All we know is that we live in a moment when everything is in
 transition. (Brandan Robertson, p. 59, *Oneing* Vol. 8, No. 1)

“What are we to do at such a threshold moment?”

asks the writer and pastor Brandan Robertson,
 writing just before the pandemic struck.

“The ancient Celtic tradition,” he says, “provides a simple response.

In moments of transition, we are simply to be.

We are to pause and acknowledge that transition is taking place.

Instead of seeking to abruptly pass through the threshold,

we are to tarry.”

Robertson admits that “thresholds can be periods of great discomfort”.

But we don’t really need him to tell us that, do we?

We feel it in our tired bones, our tense muscles,
 to the tips of our overdue hair.

And that’s from a privileged position.

Those of us who’ve lost livelihood, or far worse, loved ones;

those of us suffering from coronavirus ourselves,

or are from marginalized communities or people of color
 disproportionately affected by the virus;

this is more than “great discomfort”.

Yet here we are. Here is the threshold in which we now tarry.

Here we read the most obscure of Jesus’ “I am” statements:

I am the gate. The door. The threshold, promises Jesus.

It's not just that Jesus is with us in the uncertainty and the suffering,
although he is.

It's not just that Jesus is the Good Shepherd to comfort and lead us,
although he is.

Jesus is the gate for us bewildered sheep.
He is the door, the liminal space, the holy threshold
whose goal for us is not only transition, but *transformation*.
Jesus came for us not only to have life, but to have it *abundantly*.
Not for us to be safe or stagnant,
but to risk edging toward the newness and fullness of life
God created us to share.

We don't get there by clinging to the familiar or longing for the past.
But by naming where we are,
dwelling in the tension of the moment,
learning what we can while we're here,
and having the guts to stay here long enough
listening for that voice that calls us each by name.
The voice of Jesus, at once our Good Shepherd and
the gate through which we travel.

Amen.

#

