

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 17, 2005

“Free to Come and Go”
John 10:1-10

Last Sunday I was paid a very high compliment as a teacher of the Christian faith.
One of our youth complained
 “Why can’t you just give us a straight answer?
 Whenever we ask a question, you always answer it with another question!”

The joy I found in this honest complaint,
and the reason I took the complaint as a compliment,
 is because this young man – and others like him – keep coming back for more.
Even though they aren’t getting “straight answers”
 that resolve all their confusion
they keep coming back because as they keep wrestling with the questions
 they are finding themselves in relationship with God.

The Mystery at the center of the universe is revealed to us, not in answers,
 but in a relationship.

The Mystery is revealed in a person, Jesus Christ,
 who calls us to know and love and trust him,
 that is, to stay in relationship with him,
 even when we do not have all our questions answered.

The Christian faith is not about having straight answers.
It is about having a relationship with God,
 whose living presence, in Christ, is the final answer to our questions.

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Maybe this is why Jesus taught in parables,
 rather than in crisp, clear power point presentations.
Jesus very rarely gave any straight answers.

Today we have listened to one of his most convoluted stories.
Yet in this parable, we are given
 one of the most powerful images of God in all of scripture:
 The Good Shepherd.

As the story goes in the Gospel of John, Jesus has just healed the man born blind,
 and the once-blind man has become a believer.
Now, the Pharisees are angry with Jesus,
 and – it’s quite obvious – they are more than a little afraid of him.
He is messing around with their traditions, and they don’t like it.
He is calling people to *grow beyond* the old traditions,
 which have become hardened, ossified, legalistic, lifeless.

His followers are increasingly willing to risk everything to stay with him.
They are stepping out of what they have always known,
moving out beyond the familiar,
stepping out of the protection of the religious establishment
to be with Jesus and learn from him.

Why?

Because when they are with Jesus, they find that they are truly alive!

John doesn't give us a lot of detail about the setting for this parable.
Jesus seems to be in Jerusalem as he engages the Pharisees – but John is vague.

Could they have been somewhere near a sheepfold?
Could they, perhaps, look out and see shepherds
bringing sheep into the gate of the sheepfold for the night?

Whatever the case, Jesus chooses sheep and a shepherd as a metaphor
to describe his *relationship* to those who believe in him.

*“The shepherd comes into the sheepfold by the gate;
he calls to his sheep and they follow him because they recognize his voice.”*

I'm not sure if it's true,
but I remember hearing somewhere that in the ancient practice of shepherding
each shepherd would have a special whistle or sound
that he used to call his own sheep.
In the sheepfold, different flocks would mingle together.
When it was time to go out to pasture,
the shepherds made their sounds
and their own sheep knew that sound and went to it.

To be one of Jesus' flock is to recognize his voice, trust it, and follow it,
and not to be misled by the voices of thieves and bandits.
*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, says John,
but they did not understand what he was saying.*

So Jesus tries again, this time likening himself, not to the shepherd,
but to the gate of the sheepfold.

I am the gate.

*Whoever enters by me will be saved,
and will come in and go out and find pasture.*

The thief comes only to steal and destroy.

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

This metaphor, of Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold,
leads us to some interesting considerations
about our lives *in relationship* with Jesus.

First, as the gate to the sheepfold, Jesus is our way *in* to safety,
our way to be saved from all that would diminish our life,

our way to find comfort and rest and freedom from anxiety,
our way to have our wounds tended, and to find healing in body, mind, spirit
and relationship.

In Christ, we find our way *in* to the security of God's powerful love.
But as the gate, Jesus is also the way *out* of the sheepfold,
out from safety, out from confinement,
out from the familiar and into uncertain terrain,
out from protected space and into risk,
but also out from the tired, trampled earth of the sheepfold
and onto the fresh green grass of the pasture,
the only place where we can receive the nourishment we need
to stay alive.

What a paradox of life and faith,
that to find green pastures, to live abundantly,
we have to move out beyond the protection of the sheepfold,
out beyond the safe confines of the familiar.

We can always choose not to listen to Jesus' voice; we can choose not to go out;
like the Pharisees who chose to remain stuck in legalism, hubris, and pride.

Jesus only calls us and teaches us to recognize his voice if we will listen;
he does not force us to go with him.
We are quite literally *free to come and go* as we will.
Jesus doesn't guilt us, or coerce us, or scare us into following;
but wants us to trust him and to follow him
because we love him.
He knows that the necessary prerequisite to love
is freedom.

If we are not free to choose to love God;
then our love is not our own.

So, Jesus calls you, in a voice that you can recognize;
a voice that reveals his love for you, which is his Father's love for you,
because you belong to his precious flock.

Do you hear Christ calling you? Do you recognize his voice?
Can you tell the difference between the true voice of the good shepherd
and the false, deceiving voices of thieves and bandits
who promise you life
but steal from you, poison you, abandon you?

These thieves may be people,
but they are more likely the misguided hungers of your own heart;
to be accepted, to be secure in life, to be significant in the eyes of others.
Have you been following a thief or a bandit? Have you been led beyond the sheepfold
to a place where the ground is dry and barren and rocky?
Or perhaps you have been convinced that it is better to stay in the sheepfold,
and never to take the risk of going beyond the familiar,

to a place where you can find new and abundant life.
You can stay in the sheepfold if you choose.
You can stay in and starve.
Or you can go, step by trusting step, out with the Shepherd,
to discover the life God has in store for you.

Or, it could be that you *have* listened to Jesus' voice and followed him,
And now you find yourself in a new situation, a time of uncertainty, unfamiliar terrain.
Do not be afraid! Stay close to Jesus, your good shepherd.
Abide in his care; and trust his protecting love.
Use this time to develop you listening ears, the ears of prayer.
You are probably facing this uncertain time because your good shepherd knows
this is the best time and place for your to receive the nourishment you need.
It is the Good Shepherd who has led you beyond the sheepfold,
beyond the place of your comfort,
and out onto the exposed countryside, the risk of the open pasture,
the only place where you can be filled with abundant life.

Here is the straightest answer I can give you. Stay close to the Good Shepherd,
and he will show you the way.