

Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10
Psalm 23

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
May 3rd, 2020
The Rev. Karen Haig

On The Threshold

Well, it's Good Shepherd Sunday again... if it's the fourth Sunday of Easter, it's always going to be Good Shepherd Sunday. We hear lots of references to the shepherd and the sheep today, and not only in the Gospel. The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want *Psalm 23:1*... we were going astray like sheep but now we've returned to our shepherd *1 Peter 2:25*...the sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice *John 10:4* ... And most every year we talk about Jesus the Good Shepherd knowing our names and calling us by name, about recognizing Jesus as the one who cares for us just as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

But did you actually hear Jesus say "I am the good shepherd" in today's gospel? You may have thought you did, but it's not there. Truth be told, if we'd gone on one more verse we would have heard it. But we don't hear those words in today's gospel reading. In today's reading, Jesus began by talking about thieves and bandits climbing over the fence and not going in by the gate - only the shepherd goes in by the gate - the gate the gatekeeper has opened for him.

I have to say, Jesus the good shepherd makes sense to me. Jesus the gatekeeper, not so much. It didn't make sense to the disciples either, so Jesus said something else. Something that probably doesn't stay with us the way "I am the good shepherd" or "I am the light of the world" or "I am the bread of life" does. Today, Jesus says I am the gate. Or perhaps a better translation, I am the door. I am the way in and I am the way out. I am the threshold through which you come to enter in to shelter and safety and rest and respite and I am the threshold through which you come to go out to find green pastures and still waters and a table set just for you. I am the threshold.

I've been thinking a lot about thresholds this last week - not the thresholds themselves so much as what it feels like to be ON the threshold. After weeks of sheltering in place, we've just learned that there are weeks ahead, of life as we're living it now and then several months of slowly moving out of our current state toward a life more like life was before. And while I have become much more accustomed to what we're doing than I was weeks ago, all of this still feels like an in-between time to me. It all feels a lot like being on a threshold. It feels like a liminal time and place.

Did you know that the root word for liminal, limen, means threshold? It's that in-between place, the place where something is about to change, the place of now and not yet, the place just beyond what we know and just before what we don't. It's the place where the transcendent becomes known, the place where transformation happens. It's the place of having left what we've known but not being quite sure of what we're walking into.

I learned a lot about that liminal space as a hospital chaplain. I remember standing on the threshold of a patient's room and feeling like it was the scariest possible place to be. Standing outside a dying patient's door, I could still pretend my training had given me everything I needed, still pretend I could guide the conversation, still pretend there wouldn't be fear or even terror, still pretend that God's peace would envelope this person I had never met and whose beliefs were unknown to me. But moving through the threshold, stepping through the space in-between into something utterly unknown – well, that stepping through took away all of my certainty and the naïve belief that I could control what was about to happen. But once I stepped into the room, none of the things I'd tried to protect myself with – be they certainty, training, control or anything else, none of those things stayed with me... but none of them mattered either. Once I stepped through the threshold and beyond into the hospital room, I became just a person. A person perhaps without the right words, a person who perhaps would not be able to keep it together, a person who might not get the pronunciation right for the words of a faith tradition not my own. Just a person. A person who simply wanted to be the face of love for someone at the end of her life.

You see, liminal time, liminal space is a threshold, and the threshold is a place of utter surrender. It's a place that is uncomfortable sometimes, or at least strange. But it is a beautiful place and the place where all our growing best happens. When we are forced out of our certainties, out of our normalcies, out of our comfortable places into the places in between the known and the unknown... we CAN find ourselves in a very sacred space. And strange as it may seem, I think that's where we are right now. Liminal time. Sacred space. Oh I know it doesn't necessarily feel like that, and still, I think it's true.

When Jesus said he was the gate, when he said anyone who enters through him would be saved, I think he was talking about surrender. Surrendering to the unknown of a life of a follower who would be invited to come in for rest and comfort and safety, and to go out into the midst of green pastures. There is a lot of trust involved in that kind of surrender, but it's clear that Jesus does trust us just as he asks us to trust him. He trusts us not to follow others but to run after him. He trusts us not to answer the call of voices that are not his voice. He trusts us to enter into life, ABUNDANT life, through him.

In these strange days of living behind closed doors, it's sometimes hard for us to remember that the purpose of a door is to welcome people in, not just to keep germs out. And here on this threshold, headed into more time of staying inside, keeping people at bay, wearing masks so our expressions can't be seen, of distancing, we really need to remember that. Because the longer we do this, the more we will try to normalize it and I really don't think that's a good idea. I don't think we ought to get comfortable with the many metaphorical doors in our lives today that shut others out or hide us away. I think this is a time when it is especially important to remember that doors are to welcome others in – not just the ones we love and miss, but the stranger too.

We are so fortunate here where we live. I'm grateful to be settling into a rhythm, to know that I'm supposed to stay in for another month, to feel the safety of living in a place where we haven't had a new case of Covid19 for weeks and weeks. We are so fortunate, and we've done the right thing in the midst of this pandemic, by staying home and saving lives. We've hunkered down, we've kept our distance, we've washed our hands and worn our masks and paid attention to the experts who have helped us to do what needs to be done. Please don't hear me saying that we shouldn't do those things, we must do those things now.

I am just saying that it's important NOT to normalize this time. It's important to remember that this is the appropriate response to a highly unusual situation. But it's not a normal way to be. We've come into the sheepfold and there's a whole lot more staying in than there is going out... and still, we need to remember that when Jesus says he is the gate, it isn't whether we're inside or outside that we ought to be focused on. It's the threshold. That's where we are right now. We're on the threshold of something utterly unknown, without the comfort of what we've always known. We are on the threshold and it is precisely in that unknown, holy and sacred space that Jesus promises us abundant life. Not the kind of abundance that means cases of toilet paper stashed away in the cupboard, but the kind of abundance that comes of the promise of a new world where all are welcome, where all are able to come in and go out, where we surrender to the God of Love and abundant life belongs to everyone. I think we have a far greater possibility of walking into a world, creating a world that is more like that precisely because of this pandemic and the liminal space it has put us in. But we need to use this time, this threshold time, this liminal time to listen for the voice of our shepherd, to listen for what we are being called into.

This is a precious and profoundly important time and things will never be just like this again. Don't waste this. God is at work in all of it, and in each one of us too. Amen