

In the first centuries of the church, our grandfathers and grandmothers in the faith baptized new Christians *only* at the Easter Vigil. People prepared for baptism for months, even years, by learning the catechism. But the final element of initiation into the church took place *after* baptism during Easter week. Church elders taught the newly baptized the meaning of the various rituals, signs and symbols that they had experienced at the Easter Vigil.

That teaching period was called the “mystagogy.” The word means the “interpretation of mystery.” We still teach the mystagogy, but now we use the Sunday Masses during the 50-days of Easter to interpret the mystery and deepen our awareness of the on-going revelation of God.

In all three years of the liturgical cycle, we call the fourth Sunday of Easter “Good Shepherd Sunday.” That’s because every year, at this point in the Pascha season, we hear one of three different parts of John 10 called the “Good Shepherd Discourse.”

The sections of the Gospel we hear in the other two years emphasize the reassuring image of Jesus as the shepherd; as the promise of God’s love for us. That image is true. Scripture certainly confirms and expands that bond.

But to get to the *mystery*, we have to listen closely and courageously. Well-intended but unnecessary gentleness can romanticize the mystery right out of the passage.

And there’s nothing romantic about Jesus saying: “Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.” That’s quite a forceful challenge, so we have to remember two points: First, John’s Jesus did not come to *condemn* anyone. God gave Jesus to return all of creation to right relationship.

And second we have to remember who Jesus is speaking to. This reading is the continuation of a conversation that Jesus is having with a small group of Pharisees. He is challenging the religious leaders who are baffled by the healing of the man born blind. They are desperately clinging to their limited perspectives despite the overwhelming evidence confronting them.

Jesus has healed a man who had been thrown out of community because of his blindness. Jesus gave the man sight and brought him into relationship. And while the religious authorities are still focused on questions of who is in and who is out, Jesus provokes them again; *challenges*, but *never condemns* them. While they are still off-balance, Jesus gives them a set of images in a story.

Now, some of Jesus' teaching stories create a flash of insight. Some of his stories guide disciples into right action. Others reveal the in-breaking of God's eternal realm. Many of his teachings illustrate God's nature, love and yearning. And then there are those that confuse the listener's mind into a state of unknowing, cracking the listener open just enough to draw them further into the mystery of God; into the deeper reaches of Christian life.

The opening words, "Very truly, I tell you," are a signal. John's Jesus is shifting from conversation into a different form of speaking. He begins flooding the listeners' minds with images: sheep, thieves and bandits, gatekeepers, shepherds and strangers. We start to wonder who these characters are meant to represent.

Well, beneath all this confusion, there is mystery. We call this Sunday "Good Shepherd Sunday," but this year we hear the beginning of the story. And here at the beginning of the "Good Shepherd Discourse," Jesus never refers to himself as the "Good Shepherd." He calls himself, instead, the gate. Now, granted, "Good Sheepgate Sunday" doesn't exactly inspire posters of fluffy lambs, but going through that gate takes us from confusion into amazement.

John's Jesus frequently provides enigmatic teachings that invite people into deeper dialogue and curiosity. In this reading, his listeners don't understand the "figure of speech" he is using. They are as unseeing as the man born blind. To give these Pharisees sight, Jesus takes them deeper still: "Very truly, I tell you," (there's that signal again) "very truly, I tell you, *I am* the gate for the sheep."

For centuries, people have fried brain cells trying to work out the details. Jesus is the gate *and* one of the shepherds, but not the only one. But then there are questions about who the gatekeeper, the thieves and bandits

represent. For many people even today, the most urgent details concern who is in and who is out.

First century Palestinians would not have been distracted into trying to work out a cast of characters. They were aware of the practices of keeping sheep in fields at night. Shepherds would build a temporary circle of rocks and sticks with an opening at one end. Such a sheepfold could hold the flocks of a few families.

Then one shepherd laid across the entrance to sleep. Anything or anyone trying to get in or out would have to step over the shepherd whose *body* had become the *gate*. In the morning, he was the gatekeeper who allowed those shepherds that he knew to call their flocks out to pasture.

What 21<sup>st</sup> c. ears might miss is the reference that would have been far more shocking to the Pharisees. In the ancient walls of Jerusalem, there was a gate called the Sheep Gate. This was the only gate through which people brought animals to be sacrificed. For sheep, this was a gate that led to death.

Now, gates, almost by definition, are visual and physical markers of what is in and what is out. But Jesus is claiming to be a drastically different kind of gate. “*I am* the gate for the sheep,” Jesus said, but then: “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

To enter through this gate, do you see, is to follow Jesus through a certain death and resurrection. Through the mystery of our baptism, we not only receive our name, but we start to learn the voice of the shepherd; the still, small voice of God guiding us into the fullness of life. This is a gate to amazing liberty.

This gate provides access *in* to shelter and *out* to pasture – to *life* – without trying to define, exclude or confine people. “*Whoever* enters by me will be saved.” There’s no talk of sin and forgiveness. While these aspects are not trivial, the invitation to life is more essential. And not simply life, but life in abundance. Jesus invites even the Pharisees who have been interrogating the healed blind man.

Jesus still invites all people everywhere to listen for his voice calling their names, regardless of who they are or who they have been. The Risen Christ invites everyone into the sheepfold that is ultimately himself – the One; the *I*

*Am*, that is his own being. Life that, in its fullness, is the realm of God's heaven.

For the man born blind, life abundant began with physical sight. For the Pharisees, abundant life may well have started with the opening of their hearts and minds. For tyrannized people, life abundant can begin with the joining of allies and advocates. For people who feel trapped by loneliness, life abundant might take root with companionship and a sense of purpose. For people with debilitating health conditions, even without a cure, the seeds of a sense of peace can blossom into a deep and abiding wholeness.

Life abundant is nuanced and situational in the details. But it seems to arise whenever people are liberated from anything that seeks to rob *any* of God's children of their birthright of life, purpose and joy. Turning to Christ to pass through the gate of his risen body over and over changes people. We start to recognize that *we are* the body of Christ that offers salvation and life to all God's children.

We, ourselves, become shepherds willing to stand between any of God's children and anything that would harm or destroy them. We grow increasingly Christ-like in our ability to show people their own dignity and call them into their best selves. We extend the invitation to life abundant by showing the world how deeply God loves; how God aches for every living creature to know that they are an essential part of something good and true and beautiful.

We cannot save ourselves or make our own lives abundant any more than we can make ourselves happy. Salvation, abundant life and happiness – no matter how much we desire them – these are simply not objectives that we can successfully pursue.

Ironically, they are exactly what God desires to give us.

They are not *goals*, do you see, but *consequences*. God gives us gifts of salvation, abundance and joy as we give our *selves* to the Oneness of God; the One of which every creature is a part; the One that knows each of us by name. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God pours abundance over us and into us until we are filled to overflowing.

With our awareness opened in amazement, God's life abundant pours *from* us.

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