

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: John 10:1-18

¹ “Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

I am the gate and I am the good shepherd. This morning as we continue this Lenten series on the “I am” sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John, you get two sayings in one sermon. Jesus first argues his role as the gate to the sheepfold and then transitions to his role as the good shepherd of the sheep. In what is the closest scripture text in John to what resembles a parable, I find John to be speaking about safety. What makes you feel safe? What security blankets do you have in your life?

The whole idea of safety is getting a lot of attention in contemporary America. In our world, the idea of mass shootings don’t seem so foreign to us anymore. They horrify us and hopefully still pain us, but we can’t say we are shocked anymore. In response to our new reality of violence, the public discourse turns to conversations about safety. What’s the role of teachers, administrators, law enforcement, the general public? How do we keep people safe at school, church, work, movie theaters, shopping centers, or even at home? Your political parties, I am sure, along with your choice news network or newspaper are filling your heads with solutions to this safety dilemma, but today I’m uninterested in what they have to say. They act like they’ve got it all figured out, but I’m fairly certain they don’t, no matter how sincere their effort might be or not.

But this text says something about safety. First, consider the sheep have a sheepfold. The sheepfold is the pen, the fence that sets a limit on where the sheep can wander. That sheepfold is the first security blanket in the art of shepherding sheep. For as long as the sheep are penned up at least, the shepherd knows they won't cause themselves any harm by wandering off where they can be lost or hurt. The sheepfold has but one gate that monitors their coming in and their going out, and the shepherd can watch the gate.

A security blanket is truly a concept of psychology, especially for children. Wikipedia says that "A comfort object, transitional object, or security blanket is an item used to provide psychological comfort, especially in unusual or unique situations, or at bedtime for children. Among toddlers, comfort objects may take the form of a blanket, a stuffed animal, or a favorite toy, and may be referred to by nicknames."¹ You probably remember your security blanket from childhood--for many years I had a polar bear--or you might think about good young Linus in the Charlie Brown cartoons who took his trusty blanket everywhere he went providing him grounding and emotional security.

And all of us are still like children, and children are like sheep. We need guidance desperately; we wander; we get confused. The sheepfold pen is similar to the security blanket as it grounds us in the familiar—familiar things, familiar territory, and familiar people. We get a sense of safety and security when we are all gathered up together in our church or home. The sheep are safe gathered up in their pen with a boundary established between them and the world, and the good shepherd watching the entrance.

For years, the Brethren embraced this concept of communal safety by siloing their communities and limiting their interactions with the outside world. These communities based around the local church and the agrarian life could be self-sustaining, requiring little outside support. Over time however, the Brethren migrated out of these tightly knit communities of security and comfort and familiarity where the church could monitor the teaching of beliefs and the family elders could teach the patterns of work on the farm. Our pen-like sheepfold has dissolved, and our old security blanket isn't what it used to be as most contemporary Brethren engage with the world, much like any other person. And while when we are afraid of this big, bad world and want to silo ourselves off again sometimes so that we can just exist unto ourselves without those worldly influences, I'm afraid that time has gone. The tragic shooting at an Amish one-room school house in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, more than 10 years ago was proof that all of us in this culture are in this together now. All of us battle the same feeling of not being safe.

Jesus, in his metaphor of the sheep, the gate, the good shepherd, and the sheepfold, tells all of us that while the sheepfold limits our ability to wander except for when the shepherd is watching—the reality is that others can jump the fence. Jesus calls these fence jumpers, thieves and bandits. These folks are not the good shepherd and we should know this because Jesus says they didn't come in through the gate; they sneaked in. Jesus says "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). My Harper Collins Study Bible reminds me that this word "bandit" used here by Jesus is also the same word in Greek that referred to members of the political group that at the time of Jesus were seeking to spur on a violent, anti-Roman revolution with Messianic claims. It reminds me that these thieves and bandits are trying to steal away our attention. They want to claim us in their ranks; they want our allegiance. But they also don't have our best interests at heart. They are deceptive and cunning and only perpetuate the cycles of violence in our world.

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comfort_object

So, think about that: who or what are your thieves and bandits? Who is competing with the good shepherd for your attention and devotion? How easily are you deceived?

If you are like me and most sheep-like people, we are easily deceived into thinking that violence, hatred, and power are in our best interest. Maybe the method of the bandit isn't so bad, we might be convinced.

The most recent Marvel superhero movie, setting records at the box office, is *Black Panther*. It is the story of a fictional African nation, Wakanda, greatly advanced in science and technology, and their King and great defender, the Black Panther. The most interesting theme in the movie was watching this king, the Black Panther, discern the best way for his innovative nation to assist the advancement of Black communities around the world who have been abused, rejected, and forgotten. In a struggle reminiscent of the conflict between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, the King must decide whether his people should seek change through retributive violence against intentional and unintentional oppressors or by fostering communities of hope through support of families and restoration. Despite the cunning influence of the thieves and bandits, the Black Panther rejects their ways of retributive violence and chooses restoration.

Unfortunately, these thieves and bandits that stir up trouble by jumping the sheepfold and avoiding Christ at the gate, can be true outsiders or insiders. While it might be easiest for you to point the finger and name the outsider as the thief or bandit in your life competing with the good Shepherd for your attention, it can also be people you feel close to, people you feel a kinship to--this was the illuminating case of the film, *Black Panther*. In the time that Jesus spoke this parable, it seems likely that he is referring to the Pharisees, leaders of the Jewish religion, as the thieves who are more concerned by their own rightness than the people's righteousness--these insiders are stealing attention like thieves, or, in the days of the Old Testament monarchy, the Kings of Israel and Judah, insider leaders of the chosen people, too often behaved more like bandits than shepherds.

Do you reject the influences of your thieves and bandits? They won't make you safer. Only your proximity to the Good Shepherd provides true safety and comfort. So, let's turn our attention fully now to the portion of the text that talks about the Good Shepherd.

Jesus says that he is the good shepherd and what makes him so good is his sacrifice. The good shepherd claims ownership over each and every one of us his sheep. And to the shepherd, that ownership is like the love that a parent has for a child. It's a love that causes the Good Shepherd to be willing to lay down his life for his flock. Jesus reveals his willingness to lay down his life so that we, his children, might live. The safest, most comfortable place to be, therefore, is by the shepherd's side. Why wander when the shepherd is willing to go to such length to protect you?

Now, you might say that this is not a good enough answer to your questions about re-establishing safety in our communities. Jesus has died, and he has risen again, and we are here in church--near to his side--much like many other people around the world and our physical existence is as threatened as anyone else. And you are right--the shepherd laying down his life for you does not serve as a guarantee for your physical safety. We were never promised that. That's hard to understand as I would like to think that my Good Shepherd would save me from physical harm...

But time and time again we have heard stories of persecution, physical persecution. Need I remind you of the stories from our Nigerian Brethren. One of the women that was here with us when the Nigerian Choir sang here three years ago is a friend of mine on Facebook and she shared that her niece, a nurse, was abducted by Boko Haram just recently. These stories are

heartbreaking, and I claim no grand answer for the heartbreak that tears lives apart in Nigeria, Sudan, Syria, nor right here in our own country. To provide a definitive answer to that question would be irresponsible for me as your pastor; it'd be thievery of the Good Shepherd's sheep.

But this is what I do know...

The Good Shepherd's sacrifice of himself does something more powerful for our sense of safety and comfort than we who have never looked death in the eye might think. Through the self-giving sacrifice of Christ along with his subsequent resurrection, the powers of sin and death are defeated. This means that even in the face of death, we need not fear if the shepherd is near. We, the sheep in the shepherd's flock, have an eternal covenant. All we need do is stay near the shepherd, follow his voice, rest in his shelter, trust in his watchfulness.

I'm sorry, I cannot provide an answer to our lack of physical safety. I'm sorry I cannot say that your faith in Christ will always equal an avoidance of danger. In fact, sometimes your faith will lead you right into the thick of it--remember "take up your cross and follow." But be comforted in the fact that the good shepherd is watching over his flock and is keeping our souls from harm, for death our greatest fear is taken care of.