

I AM

The Secure Gate Frankton – 2/21/16

Scripture: John 10.1-10 Jesus calls himself the gate

Proposition: In a world where gates gives us a false sense of security, there is only one secure gate.

We are continuing a Lenten sermon series that I have titled: [SLIDE] I AM. For the seven Sundays in Lent, we are going to study the “I am” sayings of Jesus that occur in the gospel of John. In seven different situations, Jesus refers to himself as something by saying “I am...” Here’s the list: light, gate, good shepherd, bread, true vine, way, and resurrection. As we talked about last week, Jesus has been gaining more attention by making some bold claims. He told those listening to his teaching, “I AM the light of the world.” He was using the Hebrew word haya (hay-yaw). God used this name when he introduced himself to Moses. Jesus is boldly claiming to be equal with God. He is claiming to be God. So here we go with our second sermon: “I am”: the gate.

[SLIDE] We love gates. Some people boast about living in gated communities – gates that presumably keep the riff-raff out and the home owners on the inside safe. We have gates leading into our fenced yards to keep inside what is ours and to keep outside what we don’t want in our area. We have locks to reinforce our security with our gates. We feel secure with our gates. But in reality, most of us have fences that really would not be that hard to climb. And gated communities are not that secure. We’re going to talk this morning about a specific gate. Jesus called himself a gate and we’re going to talk about him.

As John 10 opens, Jesus is still engaged in a rather heated exchange with the Pharisees - a conversation sparked by Jesus’ healing of the man born blind in John 9. (As a side bar here: it’s interesting that in chapter 8, Jesus calls himself the “light of the world, then in chapter 9 he heals the darkness of blindness.) The Pharisees were acting like the ultimate bad bosses, engaging in religious ruthlessness rather than in compassion and amazement at the man’s healing. The blind man is never named and the Pharisees seem to care less about the man himself than about the legality of him being healed on the Sabbath. In response, Jesus draws on a metaphor to counter the misery-making legalism of the Pharisees.

It would’ve been hard to imagine a more miserable first-century job than [SLIDE] shepherding sheep. Besides the grinding boredom of moving sheep back and forth from water to pasture to sheepfold over and over again, shepherds faced long periods of time away from home and family. Living most of the time in the open, they were often pounded by harsh weather. Their nomadic life meant that they could dine on only the most basic foods. Besides that, they and their flocks were in constant danger from animal predators like mountain lions and wolves and also human predators like sheep-stealing thieves. Shepherds were among the poorest of the poor. They were also not very well thought of in Israelite society. Shepherds were thought to be so unscrupulous that their testimony wasn’t even allowed in court.

[BLANK SLIDE] In today’s scripture verses, you see that Jesus is setting up a contrast between the shepherd who cares for the flock and the “thieves and bandits” who come only to “steal and

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kill and destroy.” [8, 10] The Pharisees may have seen themselves as the benevolent bosses of the people, but Jesus makes it clear that their oppressive religious posturing is bringing the people nothing but misery. They’re clueless managers who just don’t get it. Jesus, on the other hand, understands the needs of his flock and is invested in bringing “abundant life” to those in his care.

So Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees in chapter 8 and then heals a blind man in chapter 9. As Jesus was leaving the city he probably came into an area where a [SLIDE] sheepfold might have been located. The hills surrounding Jerusalem were filled with shepherds and their flocks, so sheepfolds were a requirement to have around. A sheepfold is basically an almost completely enclosed pen, whose walls were rocks or mud or sticks. There is only one small opening in the wall to get the sheep in and out. It’s a place where sheep could be kept safely, particularly at night when the shepherd need to catch a few winks.

Jesus turned to the crowd around him and he tells them something that, once Jesus explained it to them, became pretty obvious. He told them that anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, is sure be a thief and a robber. But anyone who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The shepherd can call to his sheep and they will come out of the sheepfold, because the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. After the shepherd has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger; they will run from the stranger because they don’t know his voice. [1-6 paraphrase]

It’s important that we understand what he meant. First, let’s understand the [SLIDE] sheep. Sheep are considered “prey” as opposed to a predator. Since they are prey, they like to gather in herds because there is relative safety in numbers. This makes them social animals. Being social animals, sheep are inclined to follow a leader. This instinct is so strong they have been known to follow a leader over a cliff. They are always seeking to establish and re-establish leadership roles by head butting, poking with their horns, shoulder shoving, or blocking with their bodies. Lastly, sheep will follow the sound of the voice they recognize and will run from a voice they don’t know.

Jesus is comparing sheep to people. We are social animals. We desire to gather in numbers. It may be a church. It may be a local bar. It may be at the local high school gym. We feel some sense of security when we are around others. We are also prey. In the spiritual realm, we have an enemy who wants nothing more than to have us. In the physical realm, we are prey to materialism and advertisements that tempts us with false realities, as well as those who want to do us harm. These things can lead us to follow leaders that may be more bent on our destruction than on our security. They also may lead us to follow the voice of deception because we have grown accustomed to the voice. Like sheep, we tend butt heads and shoulders attempting to establish our place in authority. We desire to have things our way and are willing to push and shove to get there.

Next, let’s examine the [SLIDE] thief and robber. They don’t enter through the gate but rather try to sneak over the wall. The reason they do not go through the gate is that there is a gatekeeper. It was not unusual for shepherds to bring their sheep into Jerusalem occasionally. There would be a central pen where all the flocks would be held. A gatekeeper would have the responsibility of maintaining the security of the pen. When a shepherd decided to leave the city, he would call his flock. Those that belonged to him would follow, the others would remain behind. If a thief called out to the sheep, none would follow him because they would not recognize his voice. Therefore,

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there would be no need for the shepherd to sneak over the wall, only a thief. And the purpose would be for destruction.

When a thief entered into a sheep pen to steal a sheep, he wasn't looking for a pet lamb. He was looking for his next meal. His intent was to kill and devour his prey. Keep in mind that Jesus was describing the religious leaders of his time as thieves and robbers. Jesus makes it very clear that when personal gain outweighs the care of the sheep, they are guilty of thievery. In comparison, Jesus claims his purpose is to care for the sheep and provide them with an exceedingly good life. His desire is to give us a life rich with his favor, a life fully satisfying.

Then there is [SLIDE] the shepherd. The sheep recognizes his voice. He calls them by name. He leads them and they follow. They feel safe and secure following the voice of their caretaker. And Jesus makes this claim: [SLIDE] *I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.* [7] Again, Jesus declares himself to be "I Am." He uses the same word God did with Moses at the burning bush: haya (hay-yaw). Jesus declares his very existence makes him the gate for the sheep. [SLIDE] The shepherd becomes the gate that all predators must come through to get at the sheep. Jesus states with authority "I Am the gate." In effect, he says, "I lie in that open place so my sheep will not wonder and the enemy will not take them. I keep my sheep safe and protect them"

In the late 1800's Sir George Adam Smith was traveling in Palestine and came across a shepherd and his sheep. Smith started into a conversation with him. The man showed him the place where the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls and only one way in with no door. Smith asked about their safety at night with no door. The shepherd replied, "I am the door. When the light has gone, and all the sheep are inside, I lie in that open place. No sheep ever goes out but across my body. No wolf comes in unless he crosses my body."

Entering through Jesus' gate promises us justification (having our sins dealt with effectively), forgiveness, rebirth (being made spiritually alive), adoption (becoming a member of God's family and a joint heir with Jesus), and sanctification (being transformed into a holy being based simply on our relationship with God). It's a welcome mat that says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." [R10.11]

Also there are no locks on this gate. We can come freely into the comfort of the sheep pen. There are no demands made on us through the Law of Moses. We have a place of safety and rest. We can go freely into the world knowing our shepherd continues to watch over us.

And so can go out into the world knowing that only sheep can make other sheep. Try as he might, a shepherd cannot make a sheep. One of the last commands that Jesus gave as he was leaving to return to heaven was this: *Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.* [MK 16.15] We have an obligation to tell those around us about the Gospel of Jesus Christ and bring them into the sheepfold. Look for opportunities that might present themselves and then go for it.

