

SERMON: When God Closes a Door...
TEXT: John 10:1-10

5-3-2020

The State of Missouri will open its doors tomorrow after a month of living under a “stay-at-home” order. Of course, we’re not throwing the doors wide open, and I believe there is wisdom in this decision. Social-distancing, wearing masks and gloves, and limited group numbers will continue to be encouraged, and in some places required.

Even though many people are still going to stay at home as much as possible, we are all weary of closed doors. Closed restaurants. Closed parks and gyms and recreational facilities. Closed salons and barber shops. Closed schools and retirement centers and nursing homes. Closed churches.

Some years ago there was a story in the newspaper about a woman who was startled out of a dead sleep one night by some desperate cries of “Help! Help!” You know how it is when you’re awakened by a sound. It’s hard to be certain whether you really heard something or if it was just a dream. At first she thought perhaps her husband had cried out, but he was sleeping soundly next to her. Then suddenly she heard the cries again: “Help! Help!” Finally she threw back the

covers and headed downstairs toward their living room. “Help!” She heard the voice again, but could not see anyone. “Where are you?” the woman called. “In the fireplace.”

Sure enough, dangling in the fireplace with his head sticking through the flue was a burglar, upside down and quite snugly stuck! The police and fire department got him out eventually, though not before having to disassemble the mantle and some of the masonry. The best part of the story is what this woman did in the meantime. She flipped on all the lights and videotaped the whole thing. I don't know what the two talked about while waiting for the police to arrive, but someone suggested that the homeowner should have taken out her Bible and given the crook a pointed reading of John 10: “Verily I tell you, anyone who does not enter by the door, but climbs in by another way is a thief and a robber!”

Well, you might wonder why I am talking about doors when we began the service with the 23rd Psalm and just read from the Gospel of John about the shepherd and sheepfold.

When I started reading this passage more carefully, I realized that it is much more confusing than it seems. There are a number of mixed metaphors involving too many characters.

First, Jesus talks of the sheepfold, saying that anyone who does not enter by the gate is a thief and a bandit. Then, he mentions the shepherd, the one who enters by the gate. Then, there's a gatekeeper, who opens the gate for the shepherd. Then, we're back to the shepherd, who calls the sheep by name and leads them out. They follow him because they know his voice.

Then John writes "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them." Frankly, I'm not sure I understand either.

We know that Jesus isn't a thief or a bandit - that part's easy. And we probably automatically assume that he's the shepherd. It's the image we know best. But then there's a gatekeeper. And then Jesus tries to explain the whole thing, saying, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." In fact, he says it twice. "I am the gate." Other translations use the word, "door."

Now, nevermind the fact that in verse 11 - immediately following the passage we're reading today - Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." Again, I'm assuming most of us have a pretty good handle on this one. So, let's look more closely at Jesus as "the gate" or "the door."

Jesus expands on this image to help us out. "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 kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

It's a good place to be, the sheepfold. To be among others who know the Shepherd's voice and whom the Shepherd calls by name. The sheepfold is a place of abundant life, where all our needs are met. It is a place of green pastures and still waters, where our souls can be restored. It is a place of guidance and comfort, where protection is provided and fears are calmed. It is a place of feasting and healing, where goodness and mercy are always present. The sheepfold is the house of the Lord.

And Jesus is the way in. Others will try to get to the sheep by another way. Thieves and bandits will promise abundant life, trying to get the sheep to follow them. They will promise excitement and adventure. Even greener pastures and greater abundance. But instead of restoring our souls, following these bandits will cost us our souls.

George Adam Smith was a 19th century biblical scholar who wrote of his travels in the Holy Land. One day he came across a shepherd and his sheep. He began talking with the shepherd, and the shepherd showed him the fold into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls with an opening in one of the walls. Smith questioned the shepherd, “This is where the sheep go at night?” “Yes,” said the shepherd. “When they are here, they are perfectly safe. “But there is no door,” said Smith. “I am the door,” replied the shepherd. “When light has gone, and all the sheep are inside, I lie down in that open space. No sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body. I am the door.”

We have known a lot of disappointment and frustration over the past several weeks with so many closed doors. Even though we will begin to open gradually, it is important to remember that the closed doors are for the protection and health of every person. These closed doors are a tangible demonstration of love.

When the world closes its doors - for whatever reason - may we be assured that abundance and peace and safety and community can be found in Jesus, who is the door and the Good Shepherd. And may we always know that we are welcome at the Lord's Table to feast on him, who is the Bread of Life, and to drink from him the Cup of Salvation. This table is never closed. We are always a community here with the saints of all times and places.

May our spirits be lifted and joined together by the Holy Spirit... to the glory of God.

AMEN.