
The Door and the Good Shepherd

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
John 10.11

Most of us have heard that phrase before. "Jesus is the good shepherd," we say to ourselves over and over again. Then our eyes glaze over, and we imagine that all is comfortable and good. But I want us to consider this passage differently this morning. I want us to consider where Jesus was when he talked about sheep. He was not out in the green fields with sheep grazing happily around him.

Jesus talked about sheep in the temple!

When Jesus stood in the temple of Jerusalem, two thousand years ago, and he mentioned sheep, he was not talking about pleasant, frolicking, little sheep out in the pasture. I know we like to think of Jesus standing around cuddly sheep, sheep who look just like the little stuffed lambs on our children's beds.

But Jesus said these things in the temple, not out in the pasture. Jesus was talking about sheep in the temple. Jesus was talking about sheep that were about to be sacrificed. They were about to be slaughtered.

In the ancient temple of Jerusalem, there was only one door where sheep went in. And it was a door that led only one way. It went in.

That door led to the place of ritual slaughter and sacrifice. Listen to the first verses of the tenth chapter of John.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. , He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. , Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." (John 10.2-7)

It is quite telling in this tenth chapter of John that Jesus first identifies himself, not as the good shepherd, but as the door—the gate—where these sheep went in. They traveled in only one direction: in. There they were sacrificed, killed.

I was with James Alison two weeks ago. You remember James Alison, the brilliant scholar who preached here on Good Friday. Allison teaches us something about this passage when he talks about atonement.¹

The mystery of the atonement is that Jesus uses the sacrificial system to *defeat* the sacrificial system. He lets himself be a victim but he goes willingly, thereby showing humanity that the sacrifice system is powerless. It is meaningless. Thus, we are saved and brought close to God's life.

Jesus shows us that our human compulsion to victimize does not work. When we scapegoat others, it does not work. When we place all our blame on others, it does not work.

Jesus claims, in this amazing tenth chapter of John that he is the door. Thus, Jesus is the door that lets sacrificial victims go into the place of violence, but then comes out again. They do not go in just to die, as all the other sheep have. They go in, in order to come back out again! "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out." (John 10.9).

This is what the sacrifice of Jesus means. Jesus accepts the group dynamic of sacrifice. He lets the system put him to death. But then he rises from the dead. Jesus shows us that death is meaningless. It has no power over Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Consider how the human community, you and I, need so often to scapegoat other people. You've all heard the phrase. "We need a common enemy in order to unify the people."

Alison and others² show us that this principle works throughout our human structures. We know how it works in the local schoolyards. The local bully decides to pick on someone. And the others join in to help him do violence to the victim. The others, you and I, join, so that we will not be hurt.

In the human, sacrificial system, focusing all the violence on some other victim actually makes us feel better; we think we have won.

How many of our other social structures participate in this enterprise? Most of them do. Politicians know that if we can focus what is wrong on some other victim, the voters will see him or her as a hero. Religious folks, God bless us, do the same thing. We save ourselves by deciding that God is against the other.

Social groups castigate the poor, as if that is where all the blame is. And it's not just the poor who are castigated. The rich get blamed too, don't they? The democrats blame the republicans. The republicans blame the democrats.

Some say that this is also the reason nations go to war. Nations try to identify an enemy, sometimes an enemy who has done little commensurate harm, in order that the nation can seem great.

This enterprise is part of an unjust social system, but it is the human system. It is the human condition. It is sinful. We are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3.23).

Jesus, then, as our savior, delivers us from this very system, this system of violence and death. Because Jesus takes on the role of the victim. Jesus sees the sheep about to be slaughtered in the temple.

That is how Jews and Hebrews of the first century united themselves and tried to get rid of their own sinfulness. They took that innocent and lowly lamb, a sheep, and forced the sheep through the door into the place of slaughter.

Jesus, our Lord Jesus and the Savior of the world, enters this system completely. He sees humanity striving to slaughter the innocent sheep of our own society, and he willingly becomes the lamb, the sheep, the Lamb of God.

Jesus says that he is the gate, the door. When he says this, he means the door between death and life. It used to be the door leads only to death, the death of the innocent sheep. Now, in the life of Jesus, sheep can go in and then back out!

After Jesus, death is meaningless. It is nothing. Sheep, sheep like you and me, can go back and forth, in and out, between the system of death and the system of life as if there were no obstacle at all.

That is truly a good shepherd. The good shepherd does not merely gaze softly at us as if we were little teddy bears and cuddly lambs.

No, the Good Shepherd actually lays down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd becomes the victim for all of us. He is not satisfying God's vengeance. He is satisfying human vengeance.

He willingly enters the system of death and defeats it. He defeats it by showing how easy it is to pass back and forth. The Good Shepherd has the power to lay down his life, and the power to take it up again. The Good Shepherd is the door, the gate, to abundant life.

AMEN.

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I am indebted to a conversation with James Alison for the biblical exegesis which informs this sermon. One of his most recent and accessible volumes is titled *On Being Liked*. In particular, Alison follows the work of Rene Girard.

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