

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I prepared for today, before I started writing my sermon, I spent several hours reading the news.

And as I read, it struck me again how many places and people are affected by situations and actions and decisions that barely become stories – and maybe never become a headline. Or, worse, they become a headline and then fade from the spotlight while still being impacted by whatever caused the headline because something else has taken its place.

And the risk that that brings of situations not getting resolved, and people getting lost in the shuffle is so high because there are so many things going on and so many people who are affected. And it reminded me how closely we need to listen, not just with our ears but with our hearts, and who we need to listen to.

So, as I prepared for today, I thought about John's gospel, specifically the story we read last week about Jesus giving sight to a man that had been born blind. And the man's experience of being kicked out of his community because he had gained physical and spiritual sight.

And the risk of him being lost. And the reason that he wasn't is because he listened to Jesus' voice, not only with his ears but with his heart, and became one of his followers. A member of his flock.

And his story continues in our reading today – because Jesus didn't stop talking at the end of ch9.

The chapter break, not to mention having a week in between the readings, interrupts the flow of the story. So, when you have some time, I invite you to read chapter 9 up through our reading today in one sitting. Because the story is more cohesive when you read it all together.

As this story continues with Jesus talking to the Pharisees, he offers two different images to explain his relationship to those who follow him – a shepherd and a gate. And they seem to mean two different things. But the image of Jesus as the gate actually clarifies who he is as the shepherd.

In the first few verses, Jesus talks about a gatekeeper and the sheep following the shepherd whose voice they know. In the first century, and in some parts of the world today, it was common practice for multiple flocks to be kept in the same pen. So, there was an actual gate and gatekeeper.

And when it came time to take them out to pasture, the shepherd for each flock would come to the gate and call. Only the sheep of that shepherd's flock followed him out of the pen. The rest stayed and waited for their shepherd to call them.

When Jesus then names himself as the gate for the sheep – it's part of what a shepherd is and does. Again, in the first century and in some parts of the world today – when sheep are kept out in the pasture overnight, they're put into an enclosure that's usually constructed of a low rock wall that surrounds them and only has one opening for coming in and going out. Barbed branches and thorns are placed along the top of the wall to keep predators from climbing over.

And in the enclosures where there's no actual physical gate, the shepherd himself lies down in the opening where a gate would normally be. By doing this, the shepherd knows who or what comes and goes. He watches for predators and keeps them out. And in this way, he serves as protector of the sheep.

The shepherd has the well-being of the sheep at heart, rather than his own. And the sheep depend on the shepherd for their lives. He holds them in the pen for safety and protection, and lets them out into the pasture for nourishment.

And when he lets them out, he doesn't just turn them loose and leave them on their own. He goes ahead of them and leads them. And they follow him because they know him – they recognize his voice – and they trust him. The sheep have no reason to fear, because the shepherd stays there with them.

These images of Jesus as the gate and shepherd speak to the relationship of deep trust that he has with those who follow him. It isn't about who's in and who's out – in other words, this isn't about thinking of one group of people as Jesus' true sheep and everyone else as outsiders.

If we use these images in that way, we become like the Pharisees who kicked the man who now sees out of their community.

The purpose of the gate and the shepherd is to guard against the thieves and the bandits – the things that threaten the wellbeing of the sheep.

Jesus embodies this on the night of his arrest when he comes out of the garden, standing as the gate between his sheep and the soldiers who came to take him. And then as the Good Shepherd when he willingly gives himself up to the authorities, leaving his disciples safely in the fold – the garden.

Even in the chaos that followed that night and into the next day, and in the months and years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the disciples listened to and for his voice. And they remained his flock.

Throughout the rest of their lives, they followed the voice of the good shepherd. The One who kept them safe. The One they could trust. The One who led them and others to abundant life.

When we consider what it means for Jesus to be our gate and shepherd today, that same relationship of deep trust is there. And these images remind us that life in and with Jesus is more than just going out for nourishment and coming back at the end of the day. It's more than just surviving or getting by with the minimum.

Because Jesus came not just to give life, but life in abundance. He came to give us life that lets us flourish and thrive and experience joy. And he doesn't want that life for just a select few. He wants it for everyone.

Reading the stories in the gospel, it's easy for us to identify the thieves and bandits of the first century that stole and destroyed the abundant life in Jesus, often killing people in the process.

And there are just as many thieves and bandits today. We know their voices. They try to promise us the level of abundance that only Jesus can provide. They are seductive, and they are loud.

Sometimes the thieves and bandits deceive us into thinking they are the good shepherd. But instead of building community, they turn entire groups of people against each another. Instead of caring for the wellbeing of the vulnerable, they create chaos and fear, and promote hatred and apathy.

They do these things in the name of Jesus, claiming it's what he taught, when it's really just a way to hold onto their own power and authority.

But as sheep of Jesus' flock, we listen to his voice. We listen for it with our heart. We remember that God sent Jesus because of God's love for the cosmos – the entire

created order. We remember the love that Jesus embodied for people who were on the edges of their community.

And we remember Jesus teaches us that a good shepherd doesn't send their flock into an unknown or dangerous situation; he stands between them and whatever is out there, and leads them to safe pastures. He goes ahead of them to make sure the way is safe. He doesn't lead into the way of destruction or thievery, but into the way of peace and life. A way of living that brings life.

A life that opposes the thieves and bandits that seek to steal the life and joy that God wants for the whole world. A life that allows us to freely experience life in Jesus and God's love for us today.

When we live our lives this way, it opens our eyes and our hearts to the people around us – to the people and places we read about in the news, and to the things that are robbing them of this life. And it gives us the courage to stand together with them so that they, too, can have abundant life in Jesus.

Because abundant life is a life that is lived in and through Christ. It's a life that listens to Jesus' voice, our Good Shepherd, and trusts the sheer gift of God's love for the world. A life that goes beyond surviving, and lets us flourish and thrive and experience joy. It's a life that trusts that when we live this way, there's abundance for everyone.

Thanks be to God! Amen.