

SERMON TITLE- "The Sheep Pen"

TEXT- John 10:1-18

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Over the summer we have been looking at the Book of Isaiah and how its themes help us understand God's work and character. I hope you have been inspired to crack open this challenging book and to let its powerful imagery and language penetrate your mind and being.

Out of Isaiah 40 we were introduced to this picture-

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. Isaiah 40:11

Isaiah brings the picture of God as Shepherd to our attention. He of course was almost certainly familiar with that picture from the famous Psalm of David- the 23rd Psalm.

From that imagery we are taught that-

-God is our Shepherd- and loves us very deeply

-People are sheep who need "sheep herding"

In the NT, Jesus took the image of shepherd and sheep and used it as one of His major Kingdom teaching points. He did this because He knew He was the promised Shepherd. His own recognition of that role was very specific-

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36

Jesus took this picture and developed it in John 10. He tells those listening-

I am the good shepherd . . . John 10:11 & 14

Bottom line- Jesus explicitly claims to be "The Good Shepherd."

Jesus Is The Good Shepherd

Like the OT picture of the shepherd, the NT picture is very rich in meaning and as I started looking at it I thought we should spend a couple of Sundays looking at it.

Part of the reason that the imagery of the Good Shepherd is complex is that when Jesus talks about Himself as the Good Shepherd, in John 10, He introduces a new idea that I don't find in the OT- the picture of the Sheep Pen.

This picture, of course followed extremely naturally from the OT shepherd language. Everyone knew about sheep pens and why they are an essential part of taking care of sheep.

But Jesus takes that and is very specific about the application.

There Is A Sheep Pen

This was a new idea that Jesus introduces into the metaphor and, as I mentioned last time, its application was easy for everyone at the time to understand. Sheep were defenseless against predators. Sheep need safe enclosures.

As the NT continues we will see that the "sheep pen" that Jesus is talking about is the church. In the OT God's people were the people of the land of God.

The land was where Abraham went to on his journey. The land was the place of his promise.

During the years that the ancient Israelites spend in Egypt they were not in their

own land and sure enough calamity came.

The land had been the promise to which they traveled while they were in the desert.

The land of promise is where the Israelites lived during the times of the kings.

It was from the land that they were driven when they stubbornly refused to listen to God.

And when they were in exile they dreamed about the day that they would come back to it.

And they did but things did not go back to what the promise to Abraham had looked forward to.

When Jesus walked through the land of Israel they were in their ancestral land but it was occupied by the Romans.

And in the years after Jesus, during the time when the disciples were still proclaiming the KoG the land was once again captured.

For nearly 2000 years there would be not Israeli homeland.

To this day- the Jewish people are people who link themselves to a land. In the OT the land is at the very centre of the story of salvation.

But when Jesus came He was very clear about one thing- He disconnected the KoG from the land as it had been understood until that time. The KoG that He proclaimed was very real- but it did not have an earthly capital.

The shift from being a people of the land to the people of the Kingdom of God is so very important because when we misunderstand it we so easily get mixed up.

We get mixed up because we want to cash in with land rewards. We want God to give us stuff.

Jesus is so clear that Kingdom people don't get more stuff than other people.

So what do we get? We get a sheep pen. Now this might not look like much but I think we will see that actually it is a far greater treasure than we might think.

#1. The Sheep Pen Is The Church

What it did have, however, was a sheep pen, the Church where God's people gather for protection and nurture.

This is a very important thing to understand.

It is why the Church is not a place, in the normal sense of the word, it is a gathering.

Of course, gatherings need places, but it is not the building- it is the gathering that defines God's Kingdom people.

2 weeks ago, when I first talked about the sheep pen I showed a picture of a real sheep pen of the kind that Jesus' listener would have recognized. It doesn't look like much- in fact it looks decidedly shabby. In many cases they were build from thorn bushes which is not an attractive building material.

Last time I decided not us use that picture as the sermon background because it really wasn't attractive- but this week I want to use it for exactly that reason.

If the sheep pen is the church then we really need to understand 2 important things that are easy to become confused about-

1. The sheep pen is about functionality not beauty. That thorny sheep pen does exactly the job it is supposed to do. It keeps the lions and other predators out. The thorns that make for an unattractive building material- are by their very nature- the perfect sheep pen material.

You could build a very beautiful sheep pen and it would not be as lion proof as this one. It would be useless even if it were a thing of beauty.

Of course being functional does not mean it has to be ugly and when Shepherds have a sheep pen that they keep going back to- they will try to make it more attractive.

In fact one of the things we are trying to do as we renovate our church is- make it as beautiful as we possibly can.

But there is another side to the picture of the real church-

2. The real church is not always beautiful. The very nature of the church is that it is made up of people who have a tendency to stick the thorns that are designed as defense against lions- into the people they are supposed to love and care for. This is a terrible tragedy. It is not good. There is no excuse.

We need to constantly work at making sure the thorns are not poking into the sheep pen-

BUT the fact that the church is made up of real people with real personalities must be understood.

We should make the church as beautiful as we can but we must not delude ourselves into imagining that a "real" church.

Not surprisingly the idea of a sheep pen adds some interesting aspects to the metaphor the most sinister is- if the predator gets into the pen the sheep are in double jeopardy. Now they are captured by the very walls that were intended to protect them.

I told the story last time of a fox who got himself into our chicken coop. The result was that the chickens now had nowhere to hide.

And Jesus used the metaphor of the sheep pen to warn about the danger- he is blunt.

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. John 10:1

But to this metaphor Jesus adds another couple of dimensions. The first is the mixing of the metaphor-

Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep . . . I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. John 10:7-8

To make matters interesting, when Jesus develops the picture, He doesn't follow the neat rules of grammar but engages in something that English literature teachers would disapprove of- He mixes His metaphors.

But I think we all agree that Jesus is allowed to do some things that we are not allowed to do :)

Of course, He does it because as beautiful as the picture of God as Shepherd is- it alone does not describe the whole story.

#2. Jesus Is Also The Gate

This is quite a shift, in some ways but it is at the heart of the Good News. Jesus, as God's Son has all kinds of roles.

-He is the Prophet

-He is the Messenger of God

-He is the King

-He is the Healer

But all of these aspects of Jesus are part of a larger package which is wrapped up in the word salvation. Jesus is the Saviour.

He is not only the Shepherd of God's people, He is also the gate by which people enter into this salvation.

In fact He is the only gate by which entry into the salvation God offers people is accessed.

This is an aspect of the Gospel that has caused problems for people from the beginning.

“What do you mean, Jesus is the only way?”

There are 2 angles from which this statement causes problems-

First, from those who don't like the idea of a single gate. Surely, there must be other ways to get to God's plan for humanity, they say. All roads lead to Rome, don't they?

I'm sure you have all encountered that challenge- or maybe it is a question that you have.

There is not much that can be done to explain one's way around this.

Later on in John, Jesus is even more explicit-

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:6

In this passage Jesus uses 3 metaphors for who He is and what He does [the Way, the Truth and the Life] but all of them add up to the fact that Jesus is THE gate to God's salvation. There is no other entry point.

Second, those who think that they understand this and therefore know who hasn't entered. This problem is the mirror side of the first. The reasoning is easy to follow- if there is only one gate and one sheep pen then some people are in and some people are out.

That is very clear in the metaphor. But what happen next, for some people is- they spend their time trying to sort out who is in and who is out- in an unwholesome way.

It matters that people are in or out of the sheep pen. That is the whole point of the metaphor.

But where the problem has always come is- not understanding that deciding who is in or out is not easy from our side of the story. Even in this metaphor which is a clear as it can be about there being only one gate by which we enter into the sheep pen- that even here life is not simplistic. Jesus says-

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. John 10:16

Since Jesus said these words, people have tried to figure out what this means. Who are these other sheep? There are buckets full of theories and that is all they are. What is clear is- it is not simply those you see around you who are the sheep. The matter of who is in and who is out is not as simple as looking around and deciding who came in by the

gate and who didn't- or looking around and deciding who is in the sheep pen and who is outside looking in. Don't do this, Jesus is telling His disciples.

But of course, we His disciples, have been doing that since the beginning.

What Jesus wants us to do is keeping inviting people to enter- and leave the final judgments to God.

This is something that Paul repeats in Romans

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law . . . This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. Romans 2:12-16

God is the Judge. The bottom line- of the Gate image- when Jesus says He is the only gate- we have no wiggle room to try to argue our way into options that don't exist.

On the other hand- we also have no right to place ourselves into a position that God reserves for Himself- deciding who has entered the Gate and who has not.

Jesus is the Gate through which we are invited to enter.

And what is behind that Gate?

"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep . . . whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture . . . I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." John 10:7-10

The answer is-

#3. Behind The Gate Is Life- Full Life

And now we begin to understand why the treasure behind the gate of this sheep pen is worth more than any track of land you could every wish for. Behind it is life itself.

This past week a Canadian has become the most infamous person on the news. He is a rich person who loved to be around beautiful women- and now he is a man hunted for murder.

As the details of his life hit the news what is apparent is that behind the glitz and glamour of his outward appearance is a horrible life. Horrible lives are not confined to the rich but their messes are just that much more incongruous.

When Jesus came to earth, He did not come to bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey- the way that God promised land to the ancient Israelites. Jesus came to offer life.

And that is to be the focus of Kingdom people. We invite people to take up the offer that God give, through Jesus, to life.

And what a beautiful picture of the sheep pen! It is not a prison to keep people down. People are seen going in and out. Outside they find pasture- inside they find safety and rest.

One of the things that I have become very conscious of, during the financial stress times that we are in is- life is stressful out there.

There are financial stresses.

There are health stresses.

There are relationship stresses.

These stresses don't go away but one of the things that I hope we can do week after week when we gather as the Church is provide a place of rest and recovery. This rest

and recovery is not to be a place of denial of the problems of the world- but like the sheep pen, on a cold and dangerous night- a place where we can let our guard down, relax and have our wounds bandaged.

The miracle of the KoG, however is that when we understand the true meaning of life, inside the walls of the sheep pen- we also take that life with us when we go back out of its gate- as we must do.

What an offer from God to us- through Jesus- life and full life. That is something that everyone craves and needs.

That life is accessed as we enter through the gate of Jesus.

Without missing a beat, Jesus shifts the metaphor back to the original-

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd . . . he runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep . . . The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life John 10:11-17

#4. Jesus Will Die For His Sheep

We won't dwell very much on this today but it is not a minor point. We began looking at the metaphor of the Shepherd with the description of the depth of God's love for us.

In this statement, Jesus describes the depth of His love for His sheep. There is no deeper love that can be conceived of- that someone would be willing to die for someone else is the highest level of love that a human being can comprehend.

That God would be willing to do so for me- a single lost sheep takes that unimaginable love to the next level.

We must never allow ourselves to misunderstand the depth of God's love for His sheep.

The whole background to the story of salvation is God's love for people. "For God so loved the world . . ." John 3:16

Why is this so important? Because those who have entered this sheep pen now have a Shepherd who will look after them- to the very death.

Again, Jesus goes back to the original metaphor-

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me . . . 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. John 10:14-16

#5. Jesus' Sheep Recognize His Voice

In this passage we see the context of something we looked at earlier- the matter of the "other sheep." We will not have a deeper understanding of the meaning of the other flocks- because that is not the point of this reference.

The point of this reference is that- the voice of Jesus is recognized by His sheep.

Like the rest of the sheep imagery, this is easy for anyone who has had any animal to understand. You don't have to grow up on the farm to know that animals recognize the voice of their masters.

Of course those of us who did grow up on the farm can tell farm stories about animals recognizing certain voices. Every morning and evening, we called our cows into the barn to be milked. We would go to the back of the barn and call out and in they would

come. In our fields we only had our cows but in cultures where herds are mixed when the herds come in from the fields- each animal will go to its own barn.

Animals know their barns and the voices of their masters.

And what is the point? The point is not whether other people are hearing the voice of Jesus when He calls- the point is- that we have ears with the ability to hear His voice.

That is quite a claim and it puts 2 questions back to us-

First, are our ears tuned to listen? We all know what being distracted is. Choosing to listen is our assignment.

Second, when we hear, will we obey? We also know what it feels like to hear His voice and chose not to obey.

The metaphor of the Shepherd, the sheep and the sheep pen is very full. Too full for even 3 sermons but I hope that you don't leave here this morning without answering one of 2 questions-

#1. Have you entered through the Gate? There is no more important question you will ever answer.

#2. Having entered, are you taking the treasure of the sheep pen seriously/ Jesus and the rest of the NT writers spend their time and energy teaching Kingdom people about what it means to live the full life that we access when we enter that gate.