Ascension – Escondido – May 7, 2017

John 10:1-10

A pepperoni pizza, a dead car battery, Padre miscues, homeless people on the beach, fat-free yogurt, a MacDonald’s Kids Meal – Jesus might be using such items to illustrate divine truths if he were walking on earth today. For when Jesus made up his parables, he chose things from everyday life of that time, things that people saw often. The amazing thing about Jesus’ parables, however, was how such unlikely objects could be used to show deep mysteries of God – unlikely objects like a fruitless fig tree, a fishing net, a buried treasure, a self-righteous pietist, a chunk of yeast, a batch of new wine. Today’s Gospel reading presents us with another unusual picture – a door to a sheep pen. Palestinian shepherds used open pens surrounded by walls to protect their flocks, especially at night. Often several flocks would be kept together in the same pen. Each pen had a gate or door, and one of the shepherds was given the job of guarding the gate at night. When the guard wanted to get some sleep, we can assume that he would prop himself up against the gate so he’d be aroused if anyone tried to get in or out of the pen. In instances where there was no gate for the pen, the shepherd would sleep with his body stretched across the opening, in effect making himself the door.

“Well, I’m such a door,” Jesus said. This morning we pray God to open our hearts and minds to see: JESUS – THE DOOR TO THE SHEEP PEN. There are two main points to Jesus’ parable: 1.) FOR THE TRUE SHEPHERDS JESUS IS THE DOOR TO THE SHEEP and 2.) FOR THE SHEEP JESUS IS THE DOOR TO THE BLESSINGS OF SALVATION.

FOR TRUE SHEPHERDS JESUS IS THE DOOR TO THE SHEEP, Jesus begins his lesson. While sheep are in their pens, different kinds of people may try to get to them. Some won’t be using the door; rather they will climb up some other place and jump over the wall. Those who enter the pen that way are thieves and robbers. They have no right being in with the sheep and have only evil in mind.

On the other hand, the shepherd enters the pen through the door. As he approaches, the guard opens the door to let him in. The shepherd has the right to go in among the sheep. When the shepherd comes, he calls for his sheep, even calling each of them by name. The sheep in turn recognize the voice of their shepherd and come to him. Maybe he has to prod along a couple lazy sheep; maybe he has to kick one or two gently to wake them up. But he gathers his sheep from among the flocks in the pen and leads them out – all of them, no more and no less.

The sheep won’t follow a stranger, Jesus says; rather they will run away from him. No matter how much calling or prodding the stranger does, the sheep can tell he isn’t their shepherd, and they refuse to go with him. But they follow their shepherd because they know his voice and obey it. They recognize him as the one who tends and protects them.

The meaning of this parable is quite clear. We are the sheep. Psalm 100 says: "Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture" (v 3). The followers of God, the believers in Jesus Christ, are regularly called sheep. Sheep are rather helpless creatures, with a tendency to get lost and without a way of defending themselves. It is easy to see why God calls us sheep - in spiritual matters.

The shepherd is Christ, first of all. In the verse following our sermon text day, Jesus says: “I am the Good Shepherd.” As our loving shepherd he knows and cares for each of us personally. In fact he calls each of us by name. In his Word Jesus assures us: “The man who loves God is known by God” (1 Cor 8:3). “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim 2:19). Our shepherd knows each one of us individually. In turn we recognize his voice as he speaks to us in the Holy Scriptures. True sheep hear that voice and listen. There are no two ways about it. Jesus says: “He who belongs to God hears what God says” (John 8:47). True sheep follow trustingly and obediently. Sheep aren’t bright nor are they strong – but one thing about them – they are good followers and trusters. Christian sheep hear and follow their Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

In this illustration in our text, however, other shepherds besides Jesus are being pointed to, for Jesus says: "I am the gate ... The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep” (2). Jesus is saying: True shepherds are those that come to the sheep through Jesus. In this parable Jesus is talking about our earthly shepherds -- our pastors and teachers and church leaders. Christian sheep will refuse to listen to false shepherds, but instead will flee from them as a plague. There is a way to tell the difference between true shepherds and false ones too. Do they come by the door? Do they come preaching and teaching the words of Jesus Christ? Do you recognize their call because it is clearly Jesus' voice from the Bible? Do they speak of our sinfulness – our real sin – that deserves punishment in Hell – a real, eternal Hell? Do they echo Jesus’ works that he ”is the way, the truth and the life; that no one comes unto the Father except through” him?

Strong, healthy sheep need true shepherds to teach them. And GOD CONTINUES TO SUPPLY SUCH SHEPHERDS. I returned last night from Liberia where I taught classes for church workers. Liberia is one of the world’s poorest countries. Pastors and church workers are paid very little – and what pay they receive must come from their own members since the Confessional Lutheran Church of Liberia receives no outside money to finance its operation. Yet the Lord continues to send people who want to become pastors and church workers. In fact, one of the problems we encountered was the fact that it was necessary to limit the enrollment to 100 students – others had to be turned away. Here in the U.S. God also continues to supply our church body with true shepherds. 27 new men will graduate from our seminary in two weeks. That’s not nearly enough to fill all the vacant pulpits in our synod, but certainly a great blessing just the same. We need to encourage our young people to consider the pastoral or teaching ministry. We need to say to them: “Young people, do you want a life's work that is not only satisfying, but truly worthwhile? Consider the work of guiding the Lord's sheep and lambs to their Savior's arms. Consider what a privilege it is to be able to spend every day close to the Lord and working with his Word -- and in the U.S. we still pay church workers.”

Jesus spoke today’s gospel reading in a context of false shepherds. In John, chapter 9 Jesus had healed a man who had been blind from birth. The Jewish religious leaders came to investigate, and they tried hard to turn that man away from faith in Jesus. They wanted to steal him and the rest of the people and keep the honor and power for themselves.

Jesus aimed his words about false shepherds at such false religious leaders of his day. Certainly his warning is in p1ace today also. We find people following out and out religious frauds -- and also shepherds who may be sincere but whose teachings do not ring true to the words of our Good Shepherd.

True shepherds enter through the Door, Jesus Christ. True sheep follow Christ by listening to such true shepherds. To do this, you must first be able to recognize Christ’s voice when you hear it. That comes from studying the Bible to determine what our Good Shepherd says there. The Bible gives us one excellent example of such God-pleasing sheep when it tells us in Acts of the Bereans. We are told "they searched the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts17:11). The Bereans didn't even follow a shepherd of the caliber and credentials of Paul without first checking out his words to see if they were true to the Bible. A few years ago when I was the rector – the president – of Saint Sofia Lutheran Seminary in Ukraine, I got into big trouble with the bishop of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church over this verse. I said that there were a lot of Berean Baptist churches, but that I didn’t know of a single Lutheran congregation named Berea Lutheran Church. I went on to say that I think in general we Lutherans are weak in our home Bible reading and study. I hope I’m wrong in that assessment. I hope the people of Ascension are truly Berean Lutherans.

In our seminaries throughout the world we teach classes on non-Christian religions and classes on other Christian denominations. I guess pastors should know something about those subjects. But Christians needn't become experts in false doctrines or religious aberrations. Christians need to know the Bible, the Truth, and then falsehoods will stand out clearly by contrast. God offers us rich opportunities to study his Word. The translations into the modern-day English make it easy for each of us to pick up the Bible and read it for himself. And there are many Bible helps available to assist us in our understanding. In addition, our congregation's worship services and Bible Classes offer opportunities for each of us to grow in our understanding. For our children there are Sunday School and Confirmation Class. For more than 43 years our congregation’s elementary school has provided another great opportunity. For strong healthy sheep Bible study is an ongoing, lifelong need. Perhaps you’ve heard the story of the three pastors who were discussing the problem of bats in their church. One said that he had set out poison, but it didn’t seem to help. Another said that he had bought some traps, but they didn’t seem to work either. Then the Lutheran pastor spoke up: “I just gave the bats catechism classes and confirmed them, and I haven’t seen them around the church since.” Contrary to popular belief, confirmation is not a graduation from Bible study, but a one step in a lifelong study of God's Word. Each God-pleasing sheep equips himself with knowledge of God's Word so he recognizes Christ's call -­ and so he can detect the false call of a false shepherd.

Jesus continues his illustration of the door to the sheep pen. This time he turns his attention to you, the sheep. FOR THE SHEEP JESUS IS THE DOOR TO ALL THE BLESSINGS OF SALVATION.

The good life is ours in Christ -- yet we don't always have it. Why not? There are three good reasons -- maybe I should say "bad" reasons – Satan, the Sinful World around us, and our own Sinful Self.

Christ says: "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it" (Lk 11:28). Satan comes and says: ''The sermons are boring; the Bible is hard to understand; you’ve got better things to do with your time.” And we choose to listen to Satan rather than Christ.

Christ says: "Godliness with contentment is great gain." The Sinful World around us says: "Why be satisfied with your husband or wife or your lot in life; others have much better? How can you be content when it keeps getting harder and harder to pay for all the things you want?" And we choose to listen to the Sinful World rather than Christ.

Christ says: "Love your neighbor.…" My Sinful Self says: "I've had a hard day, I don't care about your problems, Albertson cashier. I don't care if you've been on your feet all day, how dare you hold me up 30 seconds to make a price-check on the ice-cream I want to buy…. Neighbor, I don't care if you've got real problems at work; I resent your dog barking or your weeds growing through my fence.... Wife, I don't care if you've battled the kids all day. I want to watch TV in peace.” And we listen to our Sinful Self rather than Christ.

Christ is the Door to God's blessings. Listen to his voice as he speaks to you through his Word and through his true shepherds.

"Whoever enters through me will be saved,” Jesus says. That's the biggest blessing of all. Through Jesus we are delivered from the misery and hopelessness of sin and damnation. There was no way for us to sidestep our guilt and duck our punishment. We are sinners. Our sin deserves Hell and a lifetime of misery before that. Christ rescued us from all that. Our Good Shepherd he laid down his life for us, the blood-money to pay our debt, blood-money to buy our forgiveness. And then he rose in victory on Easter to show that we have been justified. Easter is the great proof that we have been declared righteous in God’s sight. Christ’s perfect life and his perfect payment have been credited to our account. Now Heaven lies ahead.

The blessing of salvation is not just someday in Heaven. We enjoy now the loving care of our loving Shepherd. Jesus says: "All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them” (8). The closed gate on the sheep pen kept out thieves and robbers who were coming to steal and kill and destroy. In a much greater way our Lord Jesus guards us. He wards off our spiritual enemies, so they can't destroy us. While trouble and temptation will indeed come, the Lord promises that he will not let us be tempted above what we are able to bear, but rather with each temptation will provide a way for us to overcome it.

And the blessings go on. Jesus says: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (l0b). To those who have entered into salvation through the door, Jesus Christ, God promises a full life already now. God’s Word promises: “God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). God’s Word promises an overflowing measure of goodness and hope: "My cup runs over…. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” Listen to the evening news and hear the terrorist attacks, natural disasters, global warming, North Korea’s provocations, senseless shootings. It is enough to put anyone into a cold sweat. We Christians know these troubles are real, and yet somehow we just don't get all that upset. Why? Because we know that God is still on his throne in Heaven. The Good Shepherd still rules this universe, and we know he will continue to care for us his sheep just as he promised.

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May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, 21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.