

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Cathedral Church of St Peter, St Petersburg

3 May 2020

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

My senior year of college I signed up for a class on medieval art. It seemed like the thing to do: I was going to become a medievalist, I had taken medieval philosophy, medieval history, even medieval German literature. Obviously medieval art should be part of the package. So I attended a couple of classes, quickly realized that it was going to be *far* more work than I wanted to do—remember, I was a senior—and promptly withdrew.

As far as I can remember, I learned exactly one thing in my brief stay in that class, and it was this. By far the most popular and beloved image in early Christian art—well before the Middle Ages, before Jesus on the Cross, or the infant Jesus with his mother, before Christ the All-Ruler enthroned in glory—was Christ the Good Shepherd. The image of the Good Shepherd is everywhere for the first few centuries, in the catacombs of Rome, in mosaics on the walls of great basilicas. It is an image of the most extraordinary beauty and tenderness: a handsome young man—did you know that the word translated “good” in “Good Shepherd” is the usual word for “beautiful”?—with a lamb over his shoulders, held secure, safe from danger, no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.

And since we all know that the Fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday, and we’ve said the 23rd Psalm together, we probably have that image in mind, and of course we just heard Jesus identifying himself in the Gospel as the Good Shepherd.

But actually we didn't. That's the next verse after our reading stops. He arguably implies it in the first few verses, but he doesn't come right out and say it, and his listeners can't make any sense of what he's saying. And then, as Jesus so often does, he makes things even more confusing. "Very truly, I tell you, I am the *gate* for the sheep." That's not an image of extraordinary beauty and tenderness; it's an image of extraordinary weirdness. Now maybe if I had stuck out my medieval art class, I would know all about the vast popularity of depictions of Jesus as the Sheep Gate, but somehow I doubt it. What would that even be? A gate set in a stone wall, maybe with a halo over it?

Well, go where the difficulty is, right? What are we to make of this strange image of Jesus as the Sheep Gate? Gates get in the way. They can block your path. But gates are not walls or fences; they're not solely for keeping things out or keeping things in. The whole purpose of a gate is to swing open: "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." Jesus, the Gate of the Sheep, swings open to let us in, swings open to let us out. The sheepfold is not a prison. There is freedom there: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery," of rigid conformity to inflexible rules or impossible aspirations that confine you, stifle you, choke off the air you would breathe.

For freedom Christ has set us free, but the Gate does not swing open for just any purpose. "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence" — it swings open for us to go in and out and find pasture, to sit down and have our fill, not just anywhere, but at the table he spreads before us. "I came," he says, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly," more life, more pasture, than we can comfortably handle, truth be told, but he would fill us to overflowing — "my cup is running over" — and what else does it mean to say that his goodness and mercy shall follow us all the

days of our life if not that he will pursue us, chase us down, and tackle us with such beauty and richness and glory that we cannot contain the wonder of it?

The Gate does not swing open for just any purpose—and it does not swing open for just anyone. There are others, Jesus says, who come in and go out, but not by the Gate. They are thieves and bandits; their aim is to steal and kill and destroy, to steal the endless riches, to kill the abundant life, to destroy the beauty and glory. And who are these thieves and bandits, who come in and go out, but not by the Gate? The popular answer is that they are false teachers, which is certainly comforting to those of us whose theology is so admirably correct. But is that right? Do not we come in and go out, go about our business, not by the Gate of the Sheep, which is Jesus? When we indulge that harmless flirtation that is not so harmless, when we sport with a colleague's reputation by passing along that irresistibly juicy bit of gossip—when we make our plans, weigh our options, set forth on our adventures—all without taking every thought captive to obey Christ, do we not come in and go out, not by the Gate?

What a weird, glorious, and sobering image. Christ the Gate, getting in the way, or swinging open for us to find a life so wondrously full that we cannot contain it. Christ the Gate, our only safe path in and out, and woe to us if we abandon that path for any other. Christ the Gate, our freedom and our joy, our guardian and protector, the open road by which the goodness and mercy of the Lord will surely follow us, chase us down, and tackle us with such beauty and richness and glory that we cannot contain the wonder of it, no, not all the days of our life.

And so to our only Gate and only Shepherd, Good and Beautiful, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. Amen.