

Shut the Back Door!

John 10:1-10

Every churchgoer knows about the “back door” –a kind of secret exit plan people sometimes use when the service is over especially if it went long or to avoid the pastor, the greeting line, or an upcoming fellowship event or congregational meeting. When I was growing up, our church had a convenient “side” door that led right from the sanctuary to the garden walkway that led to the parking lot. If the line down the aisle toward the front door where the pastor stood to greet people as they exited grew too slow and long, people would begin to inch quietly toward the left through the pews and then silently exit out of the side door, to the parking lot. Exiting through the “back door” was a kind of cop out in a sense though. Those who got away with it carried with them a slight sense of having done something a bit wrong. Yet they also felt a sense of relief having avoided spending another 15 minutes saying goodbye to the pastor and conversing with fellow congregants. The “back door” count grew on congregational meeting day, especially if some difficult topics were due to come up. Ultimately it felt like a sneaky thing to do, a bit unsocial, a bit non communal, a bit irresponsible, a bit self-centered. Yet, each week, without fail, at least one or two people would sneak out the back door with a sigh of relief.

The “back door” may be a notorious place for “sneaking out,” but it can also set a dangerous precedent for who or what might be “sneaking in.” Watch any number of suspense movies, and you know, this is everyone’s greatest fear –someone sneaking in the back door, or jimmying the lock, or climbing in the basement window, or any such hacks. Anyone who resorts to screwdrivers or bricks to enter your home rather than knocking at the front door or ringing the bell is not your friend or neighbor.

This is Jesus’ first point in our scripture for today. If someone is sneaking in the sheepfold, it’s someone who wants to cause mayhem or harm to the sheep! A friend of the sheep, namely their shepherd, will always enter through the front gate.

The prophet Isaiah, among others, assured Israel that God would shepherd his aimless, unknowing people and care for them. Jesus, known as the “Good Shepherd” will lay down his life for the sheep, will protect them, call them, feed them, and now hear this, lead them out to find pasture. Why? Because healthy sheep can’t stay entrapped in the sheepfold.

Sure, sheep need to come in for protection at night to sleep protected by the stone walls of the fold and the warmth of their companions. But by day, they need to roam the pastures, eat freely, drink water, frolic, run, explore, and play, all guided and watched over by the devoted Shepherd. To eat without being eaten! That’s a stress-free sheep’s dream!

And who wants to be trapped inside day after day? Even the best sheep will get tired of each other doing that! They need a safe way to explore a dangerous world. They need a Shepherd they can trust.

They follow their trustworthy Shepherd because they know his voice. They can discern his call from those who are seeking to harm them. How? He calls to them from the front door and bids them open. He’s got the key to their hearts! They trust him because they “know” him. Because he protects them, even while providing them freedom.

He protects them while providing them freedom from the pen! They don’t need to stay inside those stone walls of the sheepfold to feel protected. Jesus the Good Shepherd will protect them within the pasture, out in the wide world, because he is attentive to them. He watches over them. He doesn’t forget them. He won’t take his eyes off them. And they know it.

Jesus allows us his people to truly “live” in unfettered, unobstructed ways, even while feeling safe and secure in his care. Now that’s a Shepherd to depend on. No one wants to stay trapped inside in fear, afraid to truly live in

the world as part of community, taking part in every adventure they can dare to engage in. No one wants to stay in the house when the sun is shining, and the grass is green! This is why Jesus is so unique. This is why this scripture is so important: “He calls them by name, and he leads them out.” Why do we need to follow him out? Because life happens in the pasture, not in the pen.

If you’re hiding in your house for fear of the world, or if your church is hiding behind its walls, afraid of its community, no relationships will be founded, no mission carried out. But not only that –what stays in one place without fresh air, light, community, and activity will atrophy and stagnate. And the fighting will begin!

This is why Jesus doesn’t just stand guard at the gate. There are all kinds of reasons not to leave the sheep in the sheep pen. Sheep can get into all kinds of trouble and bedlam when entrapped too long in the pen. Imagine how you feel stuck with the same people in one room for days on end! All kinds of disorder can ensue! Grouchiness, orneriness.

Now throw a marauder or troublemaker into the mix, some “back-door” intruder, and you’ve got some stressed out, anxious sheep to deal with, who while normally docile, with nowhere to flee can suddenly turn into difficult, panicky, aggressive animals, lashing out and causing pen pandemonium. Jesus is not going to let that happen.

Only inexperienced, lazy, irresponsible shepherds take the easy way out, sleep on the job, or leave the sheep in the sheep pen, so that they don’t need to watch them constantly out in the fields. The responsible shepherd leads them out, so they can eat without fear and escape the confines of their pen. Jesus provides safety and protection, even while providing freedom.

Jesus encourages us to go out into the world, to leave the confines of our “safe” lives and buildings, homes and status quo lives, and to follow him into the vast pastures of adventure and discipleship –knowing that he is watching over us, protecting us, and keeping us from harm as we go. So, let’s look at what Jesus is telling us: Your good and trustworthy shepherd is the one who enters in through the front door –no agendas, no side hustles, no sneaking around, no mind games.

Your good and trustworthy shepherd is the one who doesn’t let you languish in the sheepfold but calls you out into the wide, green pasture, to make sure you are properly nourished, socialized, integrated into the world, and free. He does not allow you to wallow in deception, disagreements, and disillusionment but sets you upon following him into new places and adventures, where you will find joy, grow, learn, and thrive. Where you’ll learn to live in community and in harmony and where you’ll make relationships and learn about your world. Your good and trustworthy shepherd is the one who knows that life happens in the pastures, not in the pen. But he will never let you go alone. He will protect you, guide you, and never leave you. You can trust him with your life.

You will know him by his voice. The one you hear in your heart. Come to him when he calls you. Follow him where he leads you. He is the one who represents the gateway to a better life, a better future, a better world, and a better you.

To hear Jesus’ voice is to be attuned to his presence all around you, in your home, your church, your community, your life. Unlike those “back-door” charlatans, his is the voice of hope. His is the voice of peace. His is the voice of the future. His is the voice of love.

Jesus will not enter the sheepfold of your heart forcefully like his predecessors before him. He will, however, call you, hoping you will answer, so that he can be your Shepherd, and you, his sheep. You have a choice whether you answer that call.

Your shepherd, your good shepherd, is at the door of your heart. He is knocking and calling you to come to him. Will you open the door and let him in? Better yet, will you follow him out?