I AM – THE GATE  
I AM – THE GOOD SHEPHERD

TEXT – John 10:9-11

Today we are going to look at two of the “I Am” statements of Jesus. They really stand together as one thought and they are both included in these three short verses. But they tell us a lot about who Jesus is and about how he personally cares for each one of us.

So let’s start with the gate. Some translations use “door” instead of “gate” and both words have significant meaning. And they are both applicable to the message that Jesus is giving us.

To get a clear picture of Jesus’ meaning in this statement, it is helpful to understand a little of that ancient culture, especially of sheep and shepherding. Of all domesticated animals, sheep are the most helpless. Sheep will spend their entire day grazing, wandering from place to place, never looking up. As a result, they often become lost. And sheep have no “homing instinct” as other animals do. They are totally incapable of finding their way to their sheepfold even when it is in plain sight. By nature, sheep are followers. If the lead sheep steps off a cliff, the others will follow.

So, let’s start with the door. It’s an interesting way to look at Jesus. Jesus asks us to use him in the same way as we would use an open door. It is important to observe that it is an open door. Jesus does not say “Come to me”, and then turn away. Instead he stands and appeals to each of us to approach him and enter into his gift of salvation.

Sir George Adam Smith was a well known Old Testament scholar who once related a story of an incident that happened to him as he travelled through the Middle East. As he travelled he came across a shepherd with his sheep. After talking with the shepherd for a while the man showed him to the place where he kept his sheep at night. A place with four low walls and a narrow opening. Smith asked “This is where they go at night?” The shepherd replied, “Yes, and when they are in there they are perfectly safe.” Smith replied, “But there is no door”. The shepherd responded, “I am the door.”
Of course, the shepherd was not a Christian; he was simply speaking from an Arab shepherd’s point of view. Smith asked, “What do you mean you are the door?” The shepherd replied, “When the light has gone, and all the sheep are inside, I lie in the open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body. I am the door”.

This is exactly what Jesus is saying to us here in the text. “I am the door!” To go into the fold, you must go through me. To go out to pasture, you must go through me. As the door, Jesus is the protector and provider of the sheep. So, when we come in the door, we are not only saved, but we are safe and secure. When we go out to pasture, we are nurtured and satisfied.

Jesus also stresses that he is the only door. As with many of his other sayings, he claims to be the exclusive Savior. He is not one of many options; he is not even one of a few options. Instead he is the only deliverer for all the sheep. Of course, limiting the way of salvation to himself also simplifies things for us, the sheep, as it means we can ignore all the other options, whether these options are religious or otherwise.

Think about the doors in your life and to what they give you access. Where do they allow you to go? If you refuse to go through those doors, what will be inaccessible to you? Then remember the door where Jesus stands.

Well, what about gates? In some translations Jesus says that he is the gate for the sheep. We are surrounded by gates. We arrive at and depart from airports through gates. In order to get to those gates we pass through a security gate. When you catch a train you have to go through electronic ticket gates. Many of us have security gates on the entrances to our homes…to keep people out. For you science fiction fans, there are even Stargates that provide access to distant galaxies.

Once again notice that Jesus identifies himself as “the” gate. If you are to get to God, you must deal with Jesus. Access to God comes no other way.
I sometimes think that this gate teaching of Jesus is one of his most misunderstood teachings, because people often miss the context. In Jesus’ day, sheep were kept two ways. The first was in cities and villages. Usually there was a large holding corral where shepherds would bring their flocks to secure them at night. It was a public pen able to hold several flocks under the care of a watchman whose duty was to guard the gate during the night and to admit the shepherds in the morning. The shepherds would walk into the pen, call their sheep and the sheep would respond to the voice of their shepherd who would lead them out to pasture.

The second way was how a shepherd would tend his sheep in the country. A shepherd would herd his sheep into a low walled enclosure of piled rocks with a small opening. At night, since there was no gate, just an opening, the shepherd would lie across the opening to keep the sheep in and the wild animals out. He would literally become the gate. I believe Jesus refers to both of these in this text for two distinct reasons.

So, what prompted Jesus to talk about doors and gates? First Jesus was trying to expose the false teachings of the Pharisees, and secondly, introducing Himself as the truth of God. He first tried to help the people understand that the Pharisees weren’t really their shepherds. They are false teachers who can never care for them as He does. Access to sheep could only be granted by one of two ways. Either you had to enter by way of the watchman, that is through the door or gate, or you had to sneak in over the wall. Jesus made a very clear indictment concerning the teachers of the law and Pharisees who regarded themselves as shepherds of the people. True shepherds come by way of the watchmen – God – but the Pharisees are thieves who are trying to lead you astray.

So we come to the Good Shepherd. It is sometimes hard for us to grasp all that Jesus was saying when we have no experience in the world of sheep and shepherds, especially in that culture. The Middle Eastern shepherd is well known for having a personal devotion to his sheep. He talks to them and sings to them. Just as Arab
shepherds today can separate personal sheep from larger flocks by using peculiar calls, so Jesus knows his own sheep. They recognize his voice, and he leads them.

The good shepherd provides nourishment and refreshment for his sheep. In the 23rd Psalm we are told that he causes the sheep to lie down in green pastures, where there is a place of rest and a supply of food. The shepherd provides a place where water is plentiful. Later in the Psalm David conveys the idea of abundant provision in yet another way. He speaks of a table being set, his cup overflowing, and his head being anointed with oil.

So Jesus tells us that he is the Good Shepherd. Not only does he provide nourishment and direction, but he provides safety and protection. The good shepherd is sacrificial. He is willing to ignore his own needs in order to meet the needs of the sheep.

Jesus also makes perfectly clear that the good shepherd is personally, if not intimately involved with all his sheep. His closeness with the individual sheep is so clear that he calls them by name. The shepherd can stand in the midst of multiple flocks and call his own out. The sheep respond not by the exact call or words used, but the sheep respond primarily to the distinct tone of the shepherd’s voice.

The good shepherd shows great concern for this sheep. He provides for them in terms of nourishment and rest. He guides them, leading the way. He is intimately involved with his flock and concerned for the safety of each individual. He is willing to sacrifice his own comfort, even his own life for the sake of his sheep.

This is the kind of love and care which God, through Jesus, provides for each of us. Last week, I asked each of us to insert our own name in place of the word “the” in the “I AM” statement. Today we hear Jesus say “I am Kathryn’s Good Shepherd”. And I ask each of you to make this your personal statement: “I am____’s Good Shepherd”. Again: “I am Kathryn’s Good Shepherd”.
Remember the sheep have confidence in the shepherd because the shepherd has been there for them, and the same is true of us. Without taking exclusivist detours that build fences to keep others out of the conversation, there is in John’s message, the reminder that through an act of grace, God seeks out God’s sheep. Therefore, if we hear the Shepherd’s voice calling out to us, if we’re willing to attune ourselves to the Shepherd’s voice, then we can have confidence when we walk through the darkest of valleys of life, whether they are sickness, loss of jobs, a disaster, or death of a loved one. We have this confidence because we know that in Jesus, God has already gone before us and scouted out the path. If we stick close to him, we will make it through safely. That doesn’t mean that the wolves won’t nip at our heels, but the Lord is with us, to lead us safely through the danger.

The Good Shepherd asks us to follow him and he will not let us go astray. We may be surprised where he leads us if we trust him to be our Good Shepherd. Amen