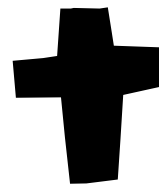




# Bringing Home the Word



4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER May 15 2011

## Opening and Closing Gates

By Diane M. Houdek

Gates are openings in enclosures. While some are merely decorative, most have some function in keeping things out or keeping things in. But they make movement from inside to outside possible. A fence without a gate is a static, closed system. A fence with a complicated or nonfunctioning gate creates unnecessary stress. I had a makeshift gate on my yard fence for a time and when I replace it with one that worked quickly and easily, the stress of my daily comings and goings eased a great deal.

Anyone who keeps livestock knows the importance of gates. There's a saying on farms and ranches that if you see a gate open, leave it open; if you open a

closed gate, shut it again after you go through. Only the shepherd knows what's being kept in or out and why. Close the wrong gate and the stock could be cut off from a necessary water supply. Leave the wrong gate open and the flock or herd could be lost to predators or traffic—or do untold damage to a garden or crop.

In the Gospel for this 4th Sunday of Easter, we hear Jesus telling his listeners, "The gatekeeper opens the gate for [the shepherd] and the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.... I am the gate for the sheep."

Those who study daily life in first-century Palestine tell us that several flocks of sheep were often penned together communally overnight for protection from night predators. In the morning, each shepherd would call to the sheep of his flock. Recognizing his voice they would gather around him to be led to the day's pasture.

These anthropologists also tell us that when a flock of sheep was penned overnight in some sort of enclosure, the shepherd would often lie across the opening of that enclosure, in effect serving as a gate to keep the sheep in and the predators out. Even if the shepherd slept, he would know if anyone tried to cross his body to go in or out.

When Jesus says, then, that he's shepherd and sheep gate, we get a sense of

the way he is intimately involved in the care of us, his sheep. We recognize his voice, knowing that he will lead us to abundant pastures and life-giving water. And we know that he laid down his life to keep us safe from danger and the finality of death.

Several verses after our reading for today, Jesus also says this about his flock: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd." It's good to remember this when we find ourselves treating our churches like some of the exclusive gated communities that have arisen in our 21st century suburban culture. It's for the shepherd, not the sheep, to decide who belongs to the flock.

With Jesus for our gate, we can let go of many of the stresses, large and small, of daily life. We can trust that with his guidance, we will discover where we can go safely—and where we can't. By following the voice of our shepherd, we learn appropriate boundaries. The First Letter of Peter tells us, "You had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls." We may not like to think of ourselves as sheep, but there's comfort to be found in the care of the Good Shepherd. As we follow him through the gates he opens for us, we know that we are safe from harm. †

### SUNDAY READINGS

#### **Acts 2:14a, 36-41**

As Peter preaches, the power of the Holy Spirit moves many hearts to repentance.

#### **1 Peter 2:20b-25**

Suffering for doing good is a grace. It makes us like Christ, who suffered to rescue us from sin and reconcile us to God.

#### **John 10:1-10**

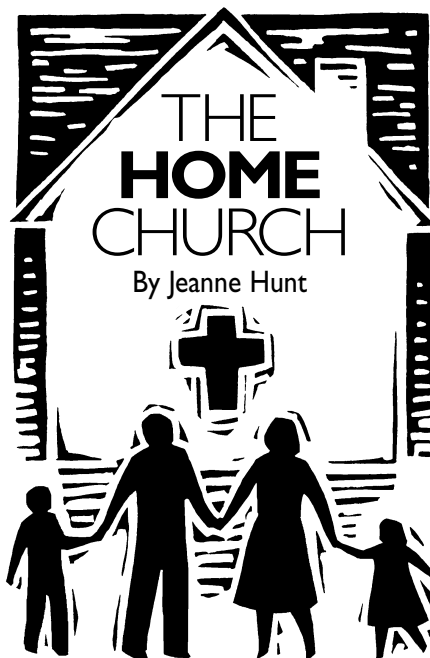
Jesus reveals himself as the Good Shepherd, the gate, the entry way into the true fold.

REFLECTION  
QUESTIONS  
QUESTIONS  
REFLECTION

- What do the words *sheep, shepherd, sheepfold* and *stranger* mean to you?
- How is Jesus a gate?
- When have you heard God's voice?
- Who are the thieves and robbers in our walk with Christ?
- How do you discern God's voice from all others that clamor for attention?

PRAYER

Good Shepherd,  
hold me carefully  
close to your heart  
and bring me home.  
Protect me from  
the dangers and distractions  
that can cause me  
to lose track of you.  
Allow your voice  
to be an ever-present guide  
in my life.  
Amen.



There are some voices that we will always know—parents, grandparents, children, brothers and sisters, dear friends. We can hear them in our heart as well as our imagination. When Jesus tells us that his sheep know his voice, he is speaking about recognizing an inner as well as an audible call.

Hearing God's voice in prayer is an acquired skill. We need to take time every day to practice this kind of listening. At first we hear nothing. Our hearts and ears cannot tune in to that frequency.

A great evangelical preacher once said that the church was filled with all different kinds of wonderful music, but the congregation could not tune in to it. He compared it to radio waves bouncing off the church walls with no transmitter in range.

Sit in a quiet place and imagine the Good Shepherd is speaking to you. Before long the voice will begin to come to you. Do very little talking. What you are doing is learning to tune your spiritual ears.

If your experience is anything like mine, the words that come to you will be right and powerful. That wonderful voice of the Shepherd will prove itself real and your heart will come to know and love it.



Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. This image of Jesus is deeply rooted in the Scriptures. Images of Jesus as a shepherd appear in very early art in the Roman catacombs, where the first saints and martyrs are buried.

Psalm 95, part of the Church's morning prayer each day, has the refrain, "We are his people, the sheep of his flock."

Psalm 23 begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Its reference to the "valley of the shadow of death" makes it an ideal prayer for funerals.

The prophets often spoke of leaders, both secular and religious, as bad shepherds, not caring for the flock entrusted to them. This was a serious accusation in a culture that depended on sheep for its livelihood.

These images still speak to our religious imagination today, not because we have daily experience with sheep and pastures, but because they are part of our cultural vocabulary. They're part of the stories that shape our lives. Through those stories, we've come to understand the care and protection that Jesus offers us. And when we're most in need of that care, the images and stories themselves tell us what we need to hear.

WEEKDAY  
READINGS

Monday	Acts 11:1-18; Jn 10:11-18	Thursday	Acts 13:13-25; Jn 13:16-20
Tuesday	Acts 11:19-26; Jn 10:22-30	Friday	Acts 13:26-33; Jn 14:1-6
Wednesday	Acts 12:24-13:5a; Jn 12:44-50	Saturday	Acts 13:44-52; Jn 14:7-14