Sermon Easter 4 2023
April 30, 2023
John 10:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

I was doing some reading for my class this week and the author of the book noted how things have changed in thought in the last few centuries. Now, notice he wasn’t talking about the last few decades as we often have anxiety about. No, this is something he said goes back centuries. He said that beginning in the 1600’s or so you saw a shift. People started looking at the world and thinking about how they could understand it differently than they had before. Now, of course, that in itself wouldn’t be a problem. If we just wanted to understand this creation as God has made it that much more deeply to understand God in His Amazingness, that wouldn’t be a problem. However, what this author said is that this understanding was directed toward the mastering of this world. And think about how true that is in so many ways. Think about how much we do that relates to the understanding of the world so that we can have mastery over it.

For example, think about this with regard to medicine. We study the body that we can have mastery over it, that we can force it to be as healthy as possible, to live as long as possible; for some even to seek to find a way to live forever—which as an interesting side note, I think indicates how God has designed us originally to live forever in Him and to desire that immortality because of Him. But as I say all of this, I want to be clear that this isn’t all bad. It’s not all inherently sinful. Good health is a blessing from God. We acknowledge that in the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, give us this day our daily bread. But think about the point being made.

And think about how that translates to God Himself. Think about how that translates to our approach to God. For example, do you have the mindset that God is there just as some sort of genie to give you what you want so that you can have the best and easiest life, that you can have some sort of mastery over this creation? And as I say that, don’t just brush off the question. It’s easy to think that we don’t, but think about how much of your praying is dedicated to that sort of mastery. Now, to clarify again, it’s not bad for us to ask God for things. He is the God who loves to give to us. But do we ask Him of these things because of Him or because of our wants.

Or to take this to the next level, think about your hope for eternal life. What is your hope for eternal life directed toward? Is it all about getting the best stuff, the best enjoyment for yourself? Do you look forward to heaven so that you can just be free of the hard stuff here, the pain, the sorrows, the suffering? Once more, to be clear, it isn’t inherently sinful that you desire to be free of those things, but is your faith just a means to that end. Is your hope all about getting to float on the paradisical cloud with your harp free of worry that you can play card games and golf with your loved ones for eternity?

To focus in on what I am really asking here, as you look at this world, as you pray, as you have faith, is it really oriented to your own comfort and desires and seeking of mastery of this world, or is it about God? Is it really about the goal of knowing this God and who He is and the joy that will be with Him in His presence in His eternal Kingdom? Again, that’s something where we really have to evaluate our hearts, don’t we? It’s easy to just brush it off, but when we think about how we approach this, it’s often in view of seeking our own ends and not seeking God in the knowledge of Who He is.

And as I say that, I was reflecting on the timing of reading this book and how it was fitting in its connection to something else I have been thinking a bit about, and that’s God’s holiness. What I appreciated is that I think there is a connection there. I think as we have turned God into this invisible genie of an errand runner, and as we have seen the world as something to be mastered for our ends and not in view of its crated glory we are doing so in a way that demonstrates how we have forgotten how awesome God really is. Think about what you see when the scriptures describe that. You see this God who calls Moses and when He appears to Moses, Moses has to wear a veil because his face shone from that glory—which by the way that glory reflected the backside of God, not even His face, because in this holiness Moses couldn’t look at the face and live! And think about that glory, that holiness on the mountain of the transfiguration. There Peter and James and John witnessed the immensity of Christ showing forth in that glory. It’s an amazing and awesome thing, this glory. It’s something that deserves reverence and awe. It’s something that when you come into its presence, it will be the most amazing and awe-inspiring thing you will ever have known. It deserves our silence, or homage, our bowing down as we see everyone do in the Bible who gets a glimpse of it.

And yet we treat it like it deserves nonchalance. We treat it like it deserves our demand and instruction. For example, I remember reading something from a sort of word-faith perspective—which if you’re not familiar with that term, it describes naming something before God and claiming it because God does desire to give us good things. And that sort of over simplifies it, but I would argue not to much. In any case, this thing that I read was making a lot of claims for the U.S., it was calling upon God—even almost demanding from God—all sorts of things oriented to the prosperity of the U.S. It framed this demand in view of promises from the Bible—which if properly understood we actually can do—but these promises were for Israel. It was applying promises to God’s Old Testament Israel to our country now. Now, again to be clear, it’s not bad to pray for our nation. We have a lot of repenting we should be doing. But this is a problem because those promises there aren’t for the U.S. They’re for God’s people. And on top of that, they are earthly promises grounded in the condition that those people be faithful to God. This is using God as a means to have mastery over this world. And it doesn’t recognize the holiness and the majesty of God properly. We need to repent of this.

Now, as I say this, you might be thinking, “Pastor, what does this have to do with Jesus as our Good Shepherd?” Well, as we have this passage where Jesus speaks of being our Good Shepherd, He does so in the imagery of being the door as well. He says, “**Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.**“

As I read that, the commentary I read this week on this passage noted a connection between this understanding and Psalm 118. Now I want read some verses from that Psalm and as I do so, I want you to make the connection as well. When you hear Jesus say I am the door, I want you to connect it to the gate. “**Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar! You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you. Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!**”

As you hear that language of the gates being opened and entering through them, this is speaking with relation to the temple, the Old Testament Tabernacle. In that, you see, you had the center, which was God’s footstool. It was the gateway from heaven and earth, and that was the Ark, and the room the Ark was in which was the Holy of Holies. Then there was the curtain that shielded the people from seeing that holiness in a way that would harm them. On the other side of that curtain was the holy place, where there was the altar of incense, the table of showbread, and the lampstand. That all was one building. Outside of that building was the altar where the sacrifices of the animals happened in morning and evening. Around all of that was the construction, the wall of the temple court, the tabernacle. And to go in and out there was a gate. You went into that gate and entered into the presence of the holy God. If you did so improperly harm and judgment would come to you. If you did so properly, you were blessed. And because of that there was a gatekeeper—and you see this image in the passage: “**To him the gatekeeper opens.**” That is to the Good Shepherd the gatekeeper opens. Now, this kind of mixes the metaphor a bit, because of Jesus calling Himself the gate, but our Lord mixes it, not me, so I think I can speak in this way.

But that said, what does this mean for you? It means that as you come before God, you need to repent of your unholiness. You need to repent of the ways you do not keep His commands, and you need to understand that this sin of yours ought to prevent your entrance through that gate. It ought to be that the gatekeeper looks at you, sees the leprosy of your sin—as leprosy would have caused one to be stopped by the gatekeeper—it ought to be that he sees that leprosy and casts you out. But you have this Good Shepherd Christians. You have this Good Shepherd in Christ. And this Good Shepherd has come and He has laid down His life for you. As He says, “**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.**” He came that you may have life and have it abundantly.

He is that life for you. He is that life as He carried your sin to the cross and buried it in His tomb. And so we understand, it’s on that cross that we see this revelation of God and His holiness the clearest. Holiness demanding justice for sin, but love for the unlovable all the more. Christ is that life as He died but was raised that you would have life and have it abundantly. And He has called you by name. He spoke your name at your baptism, He placed His Name on you in that baptism, the Name of the Great I AM, the Great I AM who revealed Himself to Moses, who shone in the body of Jesus at the Transfiguration, the Great I AM who IS the door and the gate. He put that Name on you so that you would know that you are His blessed sheep.

And just as that beloved psalm describes laying us down by still waters, those are the still waters. And He leads us to the green pastures of His Holy Supper, that He would feed us at the table set in the presence of our enemies of sin, death, and the devil, our peace and victory found in Him and given in that meal. And in these, in His voice that calls to us, He speaks that holiness to us. He actually covers over your unholiness, your sin, and gives you that holiness, makes you worthy to come into the presence of the holy and awesome God. He comes here and now and does that, deserving our reverence and our awe. And He does this as that Gate, as that Door. Yes He is the Door leading us to Father. In view of that, we seek this God seeing this holiness not in a way that will destroy us, but in the love shown on the cross. The cross showing the holy demand against sin, but the holy desire to love us and bring us to His Kingdom. Yes, that we would be rescued from the sorrow and suffering. But that we would be rescued in Him and be with Him forever in the beauty that He is. This shows us, then how to understand God. Not as that errand running genie, but as the Creator of all things, that Good Shepherd who desires you, His sheep, to be with Him in that eternal pasture where He can give you all good things, and you can bask in His goodness forever. Amen.