Text: John 10:1-10

**Introduction**

Let me be a nerd for a minute. There are different modes of language that are used to communicate different things. At one extreme would be the checklist. The creed is something of a checklist. We believe x, y and z. The checklist might invite some pondering so you understand the words, but it is more a summary of necessary things, either to do or to believe and live by. Deviating from a checklist is usually met by invective – “you idiot” – rather than explanation. Because none of us is probably “that guy” who has figured out where the checklist is wrong. At the other end from the checklist is a word picture or a metaphor. Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Shakespeare’s sonnet 18 wants us to explore how the beloved and a summer day are a shared experience and how they might be different. Why Shakespeare is a genius and most of us aren’t is that in the rest of his poem he doesn’t build on the equality with a glorious summer day but he lists how the person he is contemplating is better. “Summer’s lease hath all too short a date…but thy eternal summer shall not fade…so long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” It’s going on 400 years. I imagine it has a few more.

**Text**

Our gospel reading for today is the first half of what is usually called the good shepherd discourse. And discourse is such the wrong word. It seems more appropriate for a checklist and for Jesus’ word picture.

“Truly, Truly – Amen, Amen – I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.” It continues, but the basis of the picture is all in there. And Jesus has placed us in a picture in the middle of some action.

The main picture is that of a sheepfold. It is often remarked that Paul is the city boy and Jesus is the country boy. Jesus uses pastoral images that we who don’t always know where our food comes from beyond the grocery store might not get. But a sheepfold is one we probably get even if what we might have seen would be a cattle corral. It’s a fenced in area that safely collects a bunch of sheep. And for Jesus’ audience it comes with a built in understanding. The sheepfold is Israel, the people of God. So in using this image Jesus wants us to contemplate the people of God. And what he wants us to think about specifically is who, how and for what purposes people enter or exit the enclosure.

And what Jesus’ picture invites us to categorize is what are doors or gates into and out of the pen and what are ways that people might jump the sides of the pen. Of course in the original episode, which ends with the Jews picking up rocks to stone him, part of what Jesus is calling out is that the chief priests and the leaders of the people have not entered by the door. And this in the church remains a problem in all ages. Recognizing those who even thought they have titles and positions never-the-less jumped the fence, from those who entered by the door.

So Jesus embellishes his picture a bit. In adding to the picture he gives us a couple of ways to distinguish those who have come for the good of the flock, and those who have come to “steal, kill and destroy.”

The first way Jesus adds is the voice. “The sheep know the voice of the shepherd, he calls his own sheep by name.” Now this is where I might get my most mystical. But there are a few things we have to consider with this image. Within the sheepfold there might be sheep that are not his own. That isn’t enlarged upon in this picture. That is the synoptics image of the wheat and the weeds together. But “his own” recognize the voice. There might be those within who are not his own. Recognizing the voice. This is always the question in regard to the Word of God and scripture. How do you know? And there are lots of arguments that I can make. Good rational arguments, sometimes even pragmatic ones. We’d call most of those apologetics, making an argument for the faith. But ultimately, it is the work of the Holy Spirit and that Spirit blows where and when it wills. The Sheep hear the voice and they know it. They hear the voice of the stranger and they do not know it.

Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. And that is the work of the Holy Spirit. I put a lot of time into thinking how I’m going to preach, what I’m going to say. How I hope to reflect fully the scriptures. But ultimately my words have no power. If I think it is the power of my words, I’ve jumped into the sheep fold over the side and not the door. I trust that my time isn’t wasted. I trust that the Spirit shall use them as His means. But any power they have is because the Spirit uses them and the sheep hear the voice.

Now it is interesting to me that Jesus starts with that image but John shares that “they did not understand what he was saying to them.” Which if we know the story makes sense and is a bit of apologetics for what I just said. This is before Pentecost. That Holy Spirit has not yet been poured out. Understanding this word picture would be left until that day.

**Christology**

So Jesus shares a second embellishment that day to make things clear. “Truly, Truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.” This is what sets Jesus on that road to the Jews picking up stones and eventually crucifying him. This is what makes clear that he’s calling out the Chief Priests as those who are exploiting the people of God. But it still has resonance for us today.

If someone comes in the name of God, they better be proclaiming Christ crucified and risen. Whatever other wisdom or insight or words or images or status or anything else, if they are not like Paul committed to preaching Christ crucified, then they have jumped the fence into sheep pen.

Because it is only through Christ that we can go in and out and find pasture. It is only the good shepherd that leads us beside the still waters. And even though we walk in the shadow of death we fear not evil. Because it is Christ alone who has secured our life. It is Christ alone who fills our cup to overflowing. That we might have life abundantly. A spring welling up to eternal life. It is only in Christ that the sheep find pasture for their souls.

So, the church, the people of God, in Jesus’ picture have a couple of ways to discern shepherd from thief. The first is who and what are they preaching. If it is not Christ crucified, they are thieves. The second is the mystical idea of the voice of the good shepherd. The sheep know it. The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to renew your hearts and minds.

**Moral**

And as much as that might delve into a bit of mysticism, the image still calls for some reality from us. First, we actually have to know our own names. The voice of Jesus calls us by our name. I don’t know if anyone has every seen Miyazaki’s movie Spirited Away, but there is a deep part right at the start. A little girl is trying to get her parents back who have been stolen by the spirits – the demons. But the first thing that they do is steal your name. She doesn’t remember her name and she has to get her own name back first. We have been given a name in baptism. The cross of Christ has been traced on your forehead and heart. But if we drift away. If we let someone or some thing steal our name. If we like Esau despise our birthright, when the shepherd calls, we might not recognize our name.

The second bit of reality is that the sheep fold is safety for the night, but it is neither our eternal home nor the place we stay. We go in and out to find pasture. We live in the midst of flocks that do not hear the voice. Flocks that are following other voices, other shepherds. And there are members of the sheep fold of God that are currently following those. How we live the Christian life in front of the world is our testimony to the pasture provided by Christ. Our lives going in and out of the fold are the testimony to the door, and the voice and the good shepherd.

**Eschatological**

The sheepfold is an image of the Christian life in this world. You talk in images to try and communicate large ideas in an intuitive way. We’ve explored it for 12 mins maybe, fleshing it out, and I’m sure there are corners of the picture that we haven’t seen or touched.

Jesus entrusts the Christian Life to the picture here, but even here there is something that he entrusts to a checklist. If you enter by the door – by Jesus – you will be saved. The list of outcomes with the thieves? “Steal, kill and destroy.” Our lives here and now are heading to clear destinations. Pay attention to which voices you listen too.