

Guide for the Journey

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**Sermon Series: The
Difference Jesus
Makes**

John 10:11

*Jesus speaks of
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*...the purpose
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During the month of December, we have been studying several of the “I Am” statements of Jesus from the Gospel of John. Today, we conclude this series and conclude the year with this passage from John 10, where we encounter not only one but two “I Am” statements from Jesus. The one about Jesus being the Good Shepherd is, undoubtedly, the more familiar. Many of us, for decades, have been at least somewhat acquainted with the correlation of Jesus and the Good Shepherd. It may not be quite as familiar to many of us as the Crystal Ball in Times Square, but certainly the image of the shepherd is one of the most popular images in all of the Bible.

The image of the gate, on the other hand, may be decidedly less familiar to most, if not all, of us. Perhaps that may be because it’s easier to picture Jesus with a crook surrounded by lambs than it is to picture him as the gate of the sheepfold. Let’s face it, some images translate better into children’s Bible story books than others. I want to pause for a moment and particularly address those who have children or grandchildren. Use those Bible story books with your children as they grow up. If our children are going

to learn about Jesus (especially for those that are here for baptism today) it’s going to have to start in the home. Don’t abdicate Christian nurture and leave it up to the church. At most, we have your kids a couple of hours per month. You are the primary teachers of your kid’s faith. And I encourage you to start with the passages that are the easiest for kids to understand, such as the care and love of the shepherd, and then, as you build a base of knowledge, you’ll feel more comfortable talking about the more difficult parts of the Bible.

Parents and grandparents, maybe starting this new year, it would be good to participate in an adult learning opportunity where you can learn more about your faith as well.

Today’s passage is rich with imagery, and we could probably spend several weeks really unpacking it. But this morning, I just want to lift up a couple of key points that these verses teach us about Jesus.

Jesus speaks of himself as being the door or the gate of the sheepfold. Now, the typical Palestinian sheepfold was made with a solid wall enclosure, usually stacked stones often topped with briars, and an open roof. I guess the idea of an open roof is a bit of an oxymoron; it had no roof but was open to the sky. You see, the purpose of the sheepfold was not to keep the sheep

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protected from the elements but to keep them protected from the natural predators—particularly wolves—and from human predators in the form of robbers.

A sheepfold would have one gate by which all the sheep would enter. There were no fire codes that required multiple points of entrance and egress, just one door. Jesus is setting himself up here with a rather audacious claim of exclusivity by saying that He is the One gate, the One door of the sheepfold. He says that those who came before him were thieves and robbers and that He is the one, true entryway through which we can “be saved and find pasture.” Now, I believe that in order to fully understand Jesus’ claim in this passage, we need to know that he is also making a backhanded jab at the Jewish religious leaders of his day. When he is talking about those who came before him as being bandits and robbers, he is ridiculing the Pharisees and Saducees, whom he refers to elsewhere as a “brood of vipers,” among other less-than-endearing phrases. He says that the bandits and robbers come to steal, kill and destroy. That’s why there were briars topping the walls of the sheepfold—to keep the bandits out. But how, you may ask, are the religious leaders killing and destroying the people?

Well, Jesus goes on to say that, in contrast to the Jewish leaders, He has come to bring abundant life to the people. He says that he has come that we might have life—in all its fullness. What the Jewish

leaders did was suck life out of the people. They filled their lives with regulations, rules and requirements. No fewer than 613 regulations, which Jesus boiled down to two—love God and love others. When Jesus talks about being the gate, he is saying, “Look, follow me and you will have an abundant life.” In the language of sheep, the Bible says you will go in and out and find pasture. And what does a sheep want other than to have green pastures in which to feed? I don’t know about you, but I find that my life is a lot “greener” when I focus on loving God and loving others. It’s when I get self-focused and self-centered that my pastures get beaten down and brown, and life starts looking “greener” on the other side. Don’t get me wrong, there’s a big difference between having an abundant life and an easy life. No where, anywhere, does the Bible offer or even hint at an easy life. But Jesus is the one gate that we can go through to find a pasture filled with abundant living.

Of course, that’s only one of the images up here today. Certainly today, it was also the heavier image. I felt a little goofy taking the gate off my fence but I’m a strong believer in visual reinforcement of the spoken word. The Shepherd, as we’ve talked about, is a much more common and well-known image for Jesus. The Bible, itself, is filled with images where God is seen as the shepherd of the people of Israel. In the book of Isaiah, in the Old Testament, we hear the words that Handel incorporated into *The Messiah*: “He shall feed his flock

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like a shepherd, and gather the lambs in his arms..." (Isaiah 40:11a). And I think that the image of the Shepherd as the provider or the caretaker is the one that we most often are drawn to. But, I would like us to shift our focus a little bit this morning to see Jesus as the Shepherd who leads us. I want us to expand our thinking about the "Model Shepherd."

The Greek word that we translate as "good" is actually the word for "beautiful" (kalos). And I like what some of the translators have done in using the phrase "Model Shepherd," because Jesus is the perfect example of what a Shepherd is to be. Today's reading tells us that he knows the sheep and the sheep know him...and he **leads** them (and the sheep follow!).

Here at VPC, we have said that we are a "disciple-making church" and that disciples are simply people who are "learning to follow Jesus." Now, I think that most of us, when we're really honest, don't want to follow anyone! That is, we simply want to do what we think is right. And honestly, our American tradition is built on independence and leadership, not following. So, it is somewhat natural to recoil at the idea of "following" Jesus, or anyone else, for that matter. And I'll be totally honest in saying that I don't particularly like following Jesus either (odd thing for a pastor to say don't you think?). But the reason that I don't like following him is because he takes me places I don't necessarily want to go.

Psalm 23 talks about the Shepherd leading the sheep in paths of righteousness. Now we need to remember that the Hebrew concept of righteousness was deeply rooted in the concept of justice. Righteousness was not just about praying and reading the Bible and worshipping. Righteousness was about incorporating justice and equity into all aspects of daily living. And when I get serious about asking those honest questions about whether or not I am living out God's intent for justice in the world, then following Jesus gets to be a lot tougher.

Do you remember a few years back, there was great popularity about W.W.J.D.? Do you remember what those letters stood for? (What Would Jesus Do?) I will be the first person to admit that a lot of that hoopla was a simplistic, marketing-driven, and even juvenile theology. But let's be honest, if we really ask the question—What Would Jesus Do—the truth is we won't always like the answer. Jesus, the Model Shepherd, leads us places we don't want to go and calls us to examine things we don't want to look at.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to be "following Jesus around" through the stories in the Gospel of John. And I would venture to say that if we follow Jesus closely enough, he is going to surprise us at almost every turn.

Jesus broke the mold when it comes to religious leaders. This "model shepherd" is actually quite a maverick. And, as we move into this new year, I want to invite you to join that journey of following

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the Shepherd to see where the path takes us. The choice is up to you. You can stay comfortably where you are or you can venture out of your comfort zone to see where the Model Shepherd is going. I can almost guarantee you that if you follow the Shepherd it will not be boring. It may not be comfortable, but it won't be boring.

Speaking of following Jesus, I wonder, if Jesus were here today, where would he be hanging out tonight? I'd love for you to think about that as we close our service today and then share your thoughts with your neighbor before you leave.

Let us pray,

Lord Jesus we give you thanks that you offer us the chance for abundant living through loving God and loving each other. Teach us to follow you as our Model Shepherd so that you may be our guide for the journey and that we might walk in your paths. Remind us that there are places you want us to be, even though we might not want to go there. In your name we pray. Amen