

A Storytelling Commentary on John 10:1-10

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“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the courtyard of the sheep
by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and an insurrectionist.
The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him,
and the sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.
When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them,
and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him
because they do not know the voice of strangers.”
Jesus used this figure of speech with them,
but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.
All who came before me are thieves and insurrectionists;
but the sheep did not listen to them.

I am the gate.
Whoever enters through me will be saved,
and will come in and go out and find pasture.
The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.
I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

A primary issue in the telling of this discourse of John 10 is the character of Jesus' voice. I would recommend that you read the article that is available on the website as an additional resource on the voice of Jesus in John. Usually Jesus' voice is performed as a deep, authoritative voice making pronouncements. The voice of Jesus in John is not of that character. Jesus is a warm, accessible, humble voice that describes his love in ways that are appealing to the listeners. He is more like Garrison Keeler than he is a rhetorician or a political commentator making authoritative pronouncements. Jesus is a storyteller whose voice is a voice of reason, love and reconciliation. The telling of this section of John needs to be in that voice. You can read more about this in the article and I tried to tell this part in the recording in a way that conveyed that character. But ultimately you will have to find Jesus' voice for yourself.

This section of John's story is utterly fascinating. The translation of this section needs to be done in a way that preserves the character of the original Greek. So in the first sentence, the NRSV translates the key word here as the "gate" rather than the "door" as it is in the RSV and the King James but it continues to translate the phrase in Greek, "the courtyard," as "the sheepfold." The Greek means is "anyone who does not enter the courtyard of the sheep by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and an insurrectionist." The translation of the Greek word *laystes* in both the RSV and the NRSV

is a "bandit." For the purposes of this commentary, I'm going to translate this in a way that preserves the character of the original Greek and the allusions that are present there. You will have to make your own decision about whether you want to follow this translation and to address any or all of the issues that are involved but my goal is to make the original meaning and impact of this story explicit.

The first is the elements of the translation. To translate the Greek word *thura* as "the gate" is more accurate than to translate it as "the door." Likewise what is traditionally translated as "the sheepfold" is better translated as "the courtyard of the sheep." Likewise "the doorkeeper" is better translated as "the gatekeeper" and "the bandits" as "insurrectionists." Now why is that case? In each instance, the Greek words have an allusion to the Temple and to the Jewish War. The first sentence introduces this whole section and the best translation is as follows: "Very truly I tell you, anyone who does not enter the courtyard of the sheep by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and an insurrectionist." This sentence immediately puts this discourse in the framework of the Jewish War and what happened in the Temple during the last stages during the war, specifically the siege of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. prior to its destruction. This memory was present for all Jews in the first century and they would have immediately connected this sentence with that experience.

Why? First of all, "the courtyard of the sheep." In John 5, the sheep gate is named as the location of the pool of Bethsatha. The courtyard of the sheep is an allusion to the courtyard of the Temple, which was entered through magnificent gates. Those gates were then closed during the siege and the zealots, the insurrectionists, kept thousands of people who had gone there to retreat from the advancing Roman soldiers. Many of them wanted to leave and to surrender to the Romans. Anybody who sought to do that was killed. That is they actively prevented anyone from going in or out of the Temple.

Another dimension of what happened during the siege was that new leaders such as John of Giscala came in to the Temple, took control and demanded that people follow him but many of them did not. The followers of Jesus in that period left the city and escaped from the siege and the slaughter that followed because they did not pursue the strategies of the zealots, namely the war and the insurrection against the Romans. The tradition is, and there is significant evidence to demonstrate this, that the primary community of Christians in Jerusalem went to Pella, an ancient city on the east side of the Jordan . Thus, Jesus' metaphor is full of allusions to the experience of the people of Israel during the Jewish war.

There are two parts to this story. The first part is the metaphor of the courtyard which is usually translated "the sheepfold" and "the door" but it is more accurately translated as "the courtyard of the sheep" and "the gate" in order to preserve the allusions to the Temple. There are three verbal threads and recognizing them will make the story easier to learn.

1. "Anyone who does not enter" and "the one who does enter"
2. "The one who climbs in by another way is a thief and an insurrectionist" and "All who came before me are thieves and insurrectionists" (10.1.8) The Greek word here is *lestes*, which is used by Josephus to refer to the Zealots who carried out the war against the Romans. All of the Gospels were composed and told in the aftermath of the Jewish-Roman War, *lestes* in that context meant bandits who were revolutionaries, who stole in order to fund the revolution. Anybody who didn't agree with them, they would rob and often kill. However, "bandit" is not an adequate word to describe this group in contemporary English. A more accurate translation would be "insurrectionist" or "revolutionary."
3. "The sheep follow him because they know his voice" and then "they will not follow a stranger or an outsider because they do not know the voice of outsiders" This story is a conversation with the Pharisees that follows the healing of the man born blind. You may recall that that story ends with the Pharisees hearing Jesus say, "I have come that those who do not see will see and that those who do see will become blind." And the Pharisees reply, "Surely you don't mean that we are blind." Jesus then said to them, "If you had said, 'We cannot see,' then your sin would be forgiven. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." Today's discourse follows.

The contrast that John draws is between Jesus and the leaders of the community of Israel during the war. The two-level description makes sense in the context of Jesus' address to the Pharisees in the aftermath of the healing of the man born blind but it also makes sense in the context of the Jewish community in the 80s and 90s who lived in the aftermath of the war and the destruction of the Temple. The dominant leadership of the Jewish community in the '60's led them into a disastrous war and they did indeed enter not through the gates but by climbing over the walls, by coming up through the subterranean passages underneath the Temple as a way of infiltrating and taking over control of the Temple. They also, as is clearly described in the later part of this discourse, came to murder and to steal. They murdered thousands of Jews who did not support the revolution and/or who wanted to leave during the period of the Roman invasion. They also stole from the Temple and from rich people whose money they took and then killed.

The leaders of the war were indeed thieves and bandits. This term was also used to describe the zealots prior to the war. The way in which they supported themselves was by robbing both Gentiles and rich Jews in order to fund their various operations. It is important to recognize that this would have made complete sense to a general Jewish audience in John's day.

The audience in this discourse is addressed as the Pharisees who were in dialogue with Jesus in relation to the healing of the man born blind. So, he addresses the Pharisees in

the aftermath of that healing and their expulsion of the man born blind from the synagogue. After the war, the Pharisees shared with the followers of Jesus a rejection of the zealots and their policies of violent rebellion against the Romans. However, during the war, many Pharisees supported the revolution. Johanan ben Zakai, who became the leader of Rabbinic Judaism, was part of the revolt. In the last stage of the siege, he had his disciples put him in a coffin and carry him out through the walls. He got out of the coffin and vowed loyalty to the Romans if they would let him establish a little school in the remote town of Jamnia after the war. Jamnia became the center of Rabbinic Judaism in the post-war period. But both Christians and Pharisees in the aftermath of the war rejected the ways of the zealots who were regarded as bandits and insurrectionists.

How are we to understand then what this story meant to those who heard it in the context of the post-war period? The courtyard of the sheep is a description of what the zealots did under the leadership of John of Giscala in the battle between the forces who wanted to end the siege and surrender to the Romans and those who were determined to fight to the death. The gate, which occurs here as a primary metaphor, was a place of major conflict. The closing of the gates became a major problem for those who wanted to leave the city and to leave the temple. So, "anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and an insurrectionist." This immediately sets the discourse in the terms of the memories of the war and the siege in the Temple.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. Jesus entered into the Temple by the gate and was steadily involved in discussions with people and others in the city. In chapter five it is implied that he was at the pool and so Jesus is then the one who enters by the gate. The gatekeeper who opens the gate for him is God, whose house then Jesus enters and the sheep, that is the people, hear Jesus' voice and they follow him. When he brings out all his own, he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. So Jesus led his people in a way of peace. He did not lead as the strangers and the others did into warfare but led his sheep to a place of safety and peace. The sheep followed him and did not follow the strangers who led them to war because they did not know the voice of the strangers. This is both a description of Jesus' leadership in the time of the war and during his earthly ministry.

Again Jesus identifies himself as the gate for the sheep and that those who came before me prior to and after the war, are the thieves and bandits but the sheep did not listen to them, that is the ones who follow Jesus. He saved his people and they were able to come in and go out and find pasture. The thief and the bandits only came to steal, kill, and destroy, which is what they did, but Jesus came that they might have life and have it abundantly. In the aftermath of this, Jesus also identifies himself as the good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and the others, the hired hands being the ones who did not care about the sheep. They ran away and escaped but Jesus gave his life for the sake of the sheep. This may be an allusion to Johanan Ben Zakai who left the city but Jesus did not leave the city but rather showed the sheep a way that would lead to life. Jesus sought to bring peace. He brought comfort and consolation to the people who had

been betrayed by their leaders, betrayed into violent conflict rather than pursuing strategies of reconciliation. So in the aftermath of the war, John's listeners can look back and see what a disaster this was and they can identify Jesus' voice and follow him.

What are we to make of this? The dominant myth of redemption now is the myth of the warrior, who will redeem us by killing the bad guys. Many of the computer games and movies that we watch are about the politics of warfare. The underlying myth is that the way that we will be redeemed is by the practice of violence. It is the myth of redemptive violence. The followers of Jesus proclaim a different belief system. The way to new life is not by killing the enemy, but is following the Lord of love who gave his life for others. Radical love for one another and for the world is the way of Jesus Christ. He is the gate to a place of peace, a spiritual Temple that is a safe sheepfold, a safe haven for all those who are seeking ways of peace. We are tempted to follow the voice of strangers but Jesus' voice is the one that we know and that we are invited to follow. This is where we can find abundant life. Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for us and we know Jesus' voice. This one flock led by the one shepherd is a place where people can come together and find unity and peace. That has not always happened in the history of the church but that is both Jesus' prayer and it is a promise for the future.

This discourse then is, in its context, an allusion to the way in which Jesus lays out another way other than the way of war. He models that in his own actions and in his care for the sheep. This remains a primary metaphor for Jesus as the good Shepherd.