

St. Andrew's Sermons  
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## Fences

When you're a kid, fences are a problem. They're always keeping you out of places you'd like to explore. Where I grew up, there were some woods at the end of my neighborhood, and just when they started to get dark and interesting there was a fence, cutting off the fun. Fences were everywhere. They kept us out of fields that were perfect for football. They barricaded ponds that were full of fish. When you're a kid, fences are a problem.

But when you get older, you start to see the benefit. From the perspective of an adult and especially a parent, fences are not so much about keeping people out but about providing refuge and protection for what's inside – whether it's your kids, your pets, or your vegetable garden.

It's interesting to hold those two perspectives in tension as we consider our gospel story today. Jesus is talking to his disciples and he paints this image of a shepherd and his sheep, coming in and out of the sheepfold. The metaphor is kind of confusing, though. Is Jesus supposed to be the shepherd, or the gatekeeper, or the gate itself? It's not clear. What is clear is that all the talk about gates makes us nervous. It sounds like a restriction or a barrier. It comes across as a symbol of exclusion, and certainly over the centuries some have understood it that way, as a means of deciding who's in and who's out.

But what if we look at it from another perspective? What if the gate is always open, and the reason it's there is not to keep people out but to provide a threshold, an entry point into a place of refuge and peace? If you notice, the passage doesn't say anything about closing the gate. There are some bandits trying to cheat their way in, but the gate appears to be open. There's no mention of people being left outside, looking in. What it does say is that Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. That suggests that there's something special about entering the fold, as if following the shepherd will somehow help us become more fully alive.

It sounds to me like an open invitation. God is calling each of us across that threshold. The gate is open. Everyone is welcome. The real question is what will we find there? What does it mean to have abundant life? What does it feel like to enter the sheepfold?

I think perhaps it feels like coming home. A place to be free, to be yourself, to live in hope instead of fear. A place where you can rest in the presence of God. A place where you feel safe and loved, and because you feel safe and loved you also have a sense of purpose and direction – you hear clearly the voice of the shepherd, and you know that you need to follow.

The psalmist today puts it best: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me...”

The voice of the shepherd is always there, leading us through the valleys of our lives and calling us home. The gate is swung wide. The invitation is open to all. He came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Amen.