

The Church of the Transfiguration
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10:1-10

The Good Gate

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One of my favorite movies – as someone who grew up in the 1970s and early 80s – was *The Wizard of Oz*. I was always so excited whenever I saw in *TV Guide* (usually once a year) that the movie would be playing on network TV.

Now for those of you are Millennials, Gen Z, or even Gen A – and I’m looking over there at those of you in the choir – this was a big deal because, back then, you couldn’t just turn on the TV and watch whatever you wanted. This was long before video streaming or even cable-on-demand even existed.

Anyway, my favorite scene from *The Wizard of Oz* is the one that takes place immediately after Dorothy’s house in Kansas is lifted up by the cyclone and dropped into the Land of Oz. At that point, the movie is still in black and white – or, as my movie-loving husband reminded me, in sepia.

In that scene, everything is eerily quiet inside the house. Dorothy slowly walks to the front hallway of her home and opens the door. As the door opens, you see the first glimpses of the technicolor world outside. And when Dorothy steps through the doorway into Munchkinland, the movie miraculously changes into full color.

I still get chills thinking about that magical moment of transformation. Growing up, that doorway represented the path to an exciting world of possibilities that I had yearned for all of my life.

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Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, and it is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The theme of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is mentioned right at the beginning of mass in the Collect of the Day. The collect begins: “O God, whose Son Jesus is the *good shepherd* of your people.” The collect continues by reminding us that, like a shepherd, Jesus is the one who “calls us each by name” so that we will “follow where he leads.”

It’s not surprising that most of our readings today refer to shepherds and sheep. Psalm 23 says that “the Lord is my shepherd.” The epistle reading says that Jesus is the “shepherd and guardian of our souls.”

But the interesting thing is that today's gospel reading actually *doesn't* talk about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Did you notice that? The verses about the Good Shepherd in the fourth gospel actually don't appear until *after* today's gospel passage ends!

Instead, today's Gospel passage refers to Jesus as the "gate." Yes, a gate. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the *gate* for the sheep." He continues, "I am the *gate*. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

Now you're probably saying to yourself, "that's a rather strange image for describing Jesus." And I would agree with you. But what exactly does it mean to see Jesus not just as the Good Shepherd, but as the good "gate"? Interestingly, the Greek word that is translated as "gate" in today's gospel reading is *thyra*, which literally means "door" or "entrance." In other words, Jesus is actually saying to us that he is the good "door." So what does it mean to think about Jesus as the good "door" or the good doorway?

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To understand the image of Jesus as a door or doorway, we need to understand the context of shepherding in ancient Israel. During the day, the shepherd would lead his flock of sheep into the fields to graze on grass. Sometimes, however, it would be too late to return to the village. So the shepherd and the sheep would spend the night in an open sheep pen that was constructed out of rocks.

The rocks were stacked high so that dangerous animals such as wolves – as well as human thieves – could not enter the sheep pen easily and "steal and kill and destroy." But instead of having a front door or gate, there was simply an opening between the rocks of the sheep pen. And it was across this opening that the shepherd would sit or sleep through the night.

So that's what Jesus meant when he said that "I am the gate" – or doorway. Jesus is like the good shepherd who serves as a door to the sheep pen. That is, Jesus is the mediator between the world of safety and the world danger. Jesus is the trusted one through whom the sheep enter safely at night. And Jesus is the one through whom the sheep leave in the daytime in order to find the "green pastures" and the "still waters" mentioned in Psalm 23.

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Now Jesus is obviously not only a doorway for the sheep, but also for us. Like the sheep in today's gospel reading, we too pass through the doorway of Jesus in order to "have life, and have it abundantly." In fact, you might think about what we are doing right now – that is, attending Sunday mass – as a glimpse through the doorway to the technicolor future that is promised to us by Easter and the Resurrection.

During Communion, we pass through the doorway of Jesus by feasting on his Body and Blood – that is, the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. Holy Communion is a foretaste of the abundant life that is to come. In our encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist at the altar rail, we

stand at the doorway between a number of worlds: the material and the spiritual; the human and the divine; and the secular and the holy.

But back to *The Wizard of Oz* and the doorway that Dorothy walked through after her house is dropped into the Land of Oz. Yes, that doorway was an entryway into an alluring technicolor world that represented great possibilities – especially when contrasted with the black and white (or sepia-colored) world of Kansas.

But the doorway to Oz did not actually lead to a world of abundant life. Oz was a world of “lions and tigers and bears” – oh my! It was a world of haunted forests and flying monkeys and narcotic poppies. It was a world of the Wicked Witch of the West and the fraudulent Wizard of Oz himself. In many ways, the Land of Oz was less about green pastures and still waters – and more about what Psalm 23 describes as walking through the “valley of the shadow of death.”

By contrast, the doorway of Jesus *does* lead to a world of abundant life. It’s a world – again, in the words of Psalm 23 – of tables that are spread with good things and cups that run over. It’s a world of “goodness and mercy” that will follow us “all the days of our lives.”

The doorway of Jesus also leads to a world – as we heard in today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles – in which we can break bread together and eat with “glad and generous hearts.” It’s a world in which everyone’s needs are met, regardless of wealth or socioeconomic status.

And instead of a world that entraps us and keeps us from leaving (unless, of course, we are wearing our ruby slippers), the doorway of Jesus leads to a world of true freedom. It’s a freedom that – in the words of the Gospel – lets us “come in and go out” in order to find the true “pasture[s]” that feed and nourish us.

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And so I invite you on this Good Shepherd Sunday to reflect upon Jesus – not just as the Good Shepherd, but also as the *good gate* or the *good doorway* through which we will receive protection, nourishment, and an abundant life. “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. . . . I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. . . . I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”