

Going My Way?
John 10: 1-10

My parents both grew up in small coal-mining towns in central Pennsylvania. My mother lived on a farm outside of Osceola Mills up past the brickyard. She worked in a general store in town – and she used to walk two miles every morning to get there.

My father lived in Madera, a town his ancestors had founded in the late eighteenth century. Madera was about eight miles past Osceola on the county road after you pass through another little town called Houtzdale. My father worked at a radio repair place in Philipsburg, which is on the other side of Osceola, and he had a car.

Every morning on his way to work my father would drive past my mother walking on her way to work. I'm sure it was so that one day he stopped and said something like, "Looks like you're going my way. Do you want a ride?" I don't know whether she said yes right away, but my father was a practical, patient - and stubborn - man and I would guess that he kept stopping and asking until she agreed to take the ride he offered.

It turns out that the offer of a ride and the open car door was like a gate to a new life for her and him and them together. After his service in the Army, they married and left Pennsylvania to live in South Jersey, where my father had gotten a job with RCA. This was a radical move. My father's mother was a widow and she clung to her boys – my father and his brother John – with fierce dependency. My mother was an important wage earner in her large farm family and now that income would be lost to them.

“Going my way?” was a loaded question. The open car door was the gate to their future and their new life.

In verse seven of the tenth chapter of the gospel according to John, Jesus says, “*Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.*” Later, in verse eleven, he says that he is the good shepherd, an image we are most familiar with; but here Jesus says he is the gate.

At the beginning of the reading Jesus describes how the sheepfold works. Two main characters are contrasted: thieves (or bandits), along with strangers, and the true shepherd. On the one hand, thieves who would harm the sheep try to gain entrance by means other than the gate. They know that the gatekeeper would recognize them as illegitimate and not let them into the fold. In contrast, the true shepherd enters by the gate. The gatekeeper recognizes him as the true shepherd and gives him entrance. Besides that, the sheep recognize him; they know his voice. He calls to them in the fold and they come. They follow him as he leads them out of the fold into the pasture. But - *they will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.*

Here you have strangers and thieves who would not only lead the sheep astray but also steal, destroy, and even kill them. The gate is crucial. The gate is the way to enter the safety of the sheepfold and to leave it only under the watchful eye of the true shepherd. The gate is a place of discernment and judgment.

Jesus says, “I am the gate.” He might add the question, “Are you going my way?”

In the second half of the reading, Jesus talks about those thieves and bandits and how the sheep did not listen to them because they were strangers. It is not clear exactly who Jesus was talking about – the Pharisees perhaps, or anti-Roman revolutionaries, or the forces of evil itself – when he

says thieves and strangers. But it does seem clear that he is using the shepherding imagery to contrast true leaders with false leaders of the people Israel, that is those who are God's people. The false leaders try to break through protective fencing in order to harm and destroy. But whoever enters by way of Jesus will be saved because he comes to protect and to give abundant life. Jesus is the gate.

But what if we also consider the question I thought Jesus might ask? That is, "Are you going my way?" This question suggests that we the sheep have some choice as to whether we will indeed heed the voice of the true shepherd or whether we will let ourselves be overpowered by thieves or led astray by strangers. The question implies freedom on our part to answer yes or no.

In the early days of the church, the answer was clearly Yes. The people of the first churches came and went by way of Jesus, the gate. In fact, Jesus was called the Way. They were indeed going his way. You might think they did so in the extreme. As you heard in the reading from Acts: *All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. They kept within the fold; they spent much time together; they ate together with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.*

I think Jesus would have known that this couldn't last. Too many thieves and bandits and strangers out there just waiting to destroy that good life and lead people away from Jesus. Even more so today, so far removed in time from that first century church.

Think about some issues that are dividing the church these days, thieves that are trying to break into the fold. Take that dangerous topic ‘politics’, for example. Sometimes it seems Christianity has let itself be hijacked by politics; is that not the work of a bandit? I read a disturbing piece in one of my journals this past week written by Charles Marsh, a professor of religion at the University of Virginia.

Sometime after Operation Iraqi Freedom began [in 2003] I made a remarkable discovery. I had gone to one of my local Christian bookstores to find a Bible for my goddaughter. On a whim, I also decided to look for a Holy Spirit lapel pin, in the symbolic shape of a dove, the kind that had always been easy to find in the display case in the front. Many people in my church and in the places where I traveled had been wearing the American flag on their lapel for months now. It seemed like a pretty good time for Christians to put the Spirit back on.

But the doves were nowhere in sight. In the place near the front where I once would have found them, I was greeted instead by a full assortment of patriotic accessories...I asked the clerk behind the counter where the doves had gone. The man’s response was jarring, although the remark might well be remembered as an apt theological summation of our present religious age. “They’re in the back with the other discounted items,” he said. (Marsh 10)

Think, too, on a more personal level. What or who is stealing from you a glad heart? What robs you of joy? What saps the Holy Spirit from your life? What strange thing that is not God lures you into worship of itself? Money? Position? Attention? Technology? Fitness and health?

As a citizen, as a human being, do you think you might be looking for the gate? Are you listening for the voice of Jesus – the voice that you will recognize, as all of his sheep do? Might you be listening for his inviting question: “Going my way?”

It's a loaded question, you know, the one asked at the gate. Loaded with the promise and hope of an abundant new life through and in Jesus Christ.

Marsh, Charles. "What it means to be a Christian after George W. Bush." *The Presbyterian Outlook*. 31 March 2008: 10-12.

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