

Over My Dead Body

April 13, 2008

(Easter 4 - Year A)

John 10: 1-10

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

The day that we brought our son, Scott, home from the hospital after he was born,

We came home in high spirits, full of expectations and excitement.

However, the moment that I looked at the back patio gate that led into our townhouse, I could tell that something was wrong.

Thieves and robbers had broken into our house while we had been celebrating the joyous birth of our son.

They did not come in through the patio gate that all of us used to go in and out of our home.

These thieves and robbers had forced their way in through the sliding glass door.

As a result, our videotape of baby Scott's homecoming from the hospital also shows me being interviewed by the Houston Police Department.

Thieves and robbers do not use the gracious gate.

Thieves and robbers climb into our hearts and into our homes by another way.

Jesus says:

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

I am the gate.”

This passage from the Gospel of John is confusing.

Is Jesus the shepherd?

Or is Jesus the gate?

Which one is he - the shepherd or the gate?

The answer is that Jesus is both.

Jesus is the shepherd *and* Jesus is the gate.

Because in ancient Israel, the shepherd himself was the gate into the sheepfold where the sheep slept.

You see, at night, the shepherd would lay down in front of the entrance of the sheepfold, so that the sheep could not get out without climbing over the shepherd's body.

And no one could enter the sheepfold without climbing over the shepherd's body.

The shepherd was the gate - because he laid down his body to become the gate.

Yet, there are still thieves and bandits who will try to climb in and steal the sheep by another way.

At our Wednesday morning Bible study, one of the participants brought up some teachings that Oprah Winfrey has been promoting on her show.

I got curious about this and I did a little research about Oprah.

Oprah has been promoting the teachings of the spiritual teacher, Eckhardt Tolle, and his book called "A New Earth."

Now, I don't presume to know everything that Oprah is saying.

And I don't presume to know everything that Eckhardt Tolle is writing about.

But, from what I read on Oprah's own website, Eckhardt Tolle's message has to do with finding the secret way to happiness and self-fulfillment, the secret to finding a way out of suffering.

Now, I am not someone who likes to be judgmental and point out all the thieves and robbers that try to climb in to the sheepfold from another way.

But, we need to realize that there *are* thieves and robbers who try to seduce us into thinking that *they* are the shepherd and the gate.

But, they are not.

Only Jesus is the gate.

Only Jesus sacrifices himself for all of us to become the gate.

Jesus is *the* Good Shepherd because Jesus lays down his life for his sheep, and does *not* lead us to some secret way of happiness and self-fulfillment.

You see, my friends, Jesus never promises us a life of happiness and self-fulfillment.

As a matter of fact, the word “happiness” never appears in any of the 4 Gospels at all.

What Jesus *does* promise is that he will be the gate and that he will lay down his body and gather us into his sheepfold.

What Jesus *does* promise us is an abundant life, a life of sacrifice.

In *Time* magazine this last week, I read an article about a member of our armed forces, a Navy SEAL named Michael Monsoor who was serving in Iraq.

On September 29, 2006, a grenade was thrown by Iraqi insurgents toward Monsoor’s chest.

If Monsoor had tried to save himself by throwing the grenade off of his body, it would have exploded and killed 2 of his comrades.

Instead, Monsoor threw himself on top of the grenade, which killed him, yet spared the lives of his 2 comrades.

In this *Time* magazine article is a photograph of President Bush, awarding the Medal of Honor to Michael Monsoor, by presenting the prestigious medal to the parents of this young man who sacrificed his life for the lives of others.

I don’t care what your opinion of the war in Iraq is.

Whether you agree or disagree with President Bush’s war strategy,

It is my personal belief that one of the problems with the war in Iraq is that the sacrifices that are made by our young men and women in this war are not highlighted or shown enough.

The media are not allowed to show flag-draped coffins coming off of airplanes.

Yet, I believe that if we were allowed to see pictures of those flag-draped coffins, we would *not* see a picture of those who are seeking the secret to happiness or to self-fulfillment.

In those flag-draped coffins that come off of airplanes are the few men and women who fall on a grenade and sacrifice their lives for someone else.

And if we could see those flag-draped coffins, we would see a picture of a shepherd,

A shepherd laying his body down over the entrance to the sheepfold, the gate to abundant life.

Today, Brandon Butler is going to be baptized.

Brandon is a 9 year old boy who will be crucified with Christ, then raised to newness of life.

Brandon will promise to live a life of sacrifice, the hard and difficult life of laying down his life for others.

And Brandon has already signed up for a life of sacrificial service in the sheepfold, as he will begin serving as an acolyte in this church in 2 weeks.

Yet, we pray that Brandon will *not* be stolen away by thieves and robbers who will climb over the fence and whisper in his ear, seducing him that the secret way to elusive happiness lies in avoiding suffering and sacrifice.

We pray that Brandon, and all of us, will listen to the voice of the shepherd who will not avoid, but will walk *with us*, through the valley of the shadow of death.

For Jesus is the Shepherd *and* the Gate.

And to remind us that Jesus is the Gate, we have hung that wooden gate above our altar.

The wooden gate that hangs above our altar reminds us that Jesus lays down his body in front of our sheepfold every night, to love us and to protect us and to call each of us by name.

Jesus stretches out his arms on that cross, to remind us that abundant life begins - paradoxically - when we are at rock bottom, when we are unhappy, when we are lonely, when we fall on a grenade, when we don't feel self-fulfilled.

And yet, there are robbers who try to climb in to our sheepfold.
Thieves whisper in our ear and try to steal us sheep away.
But the Good Shepherd throws himself down on the ground and snarls
back at them:

“Over my dead body.”

AMEN.

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