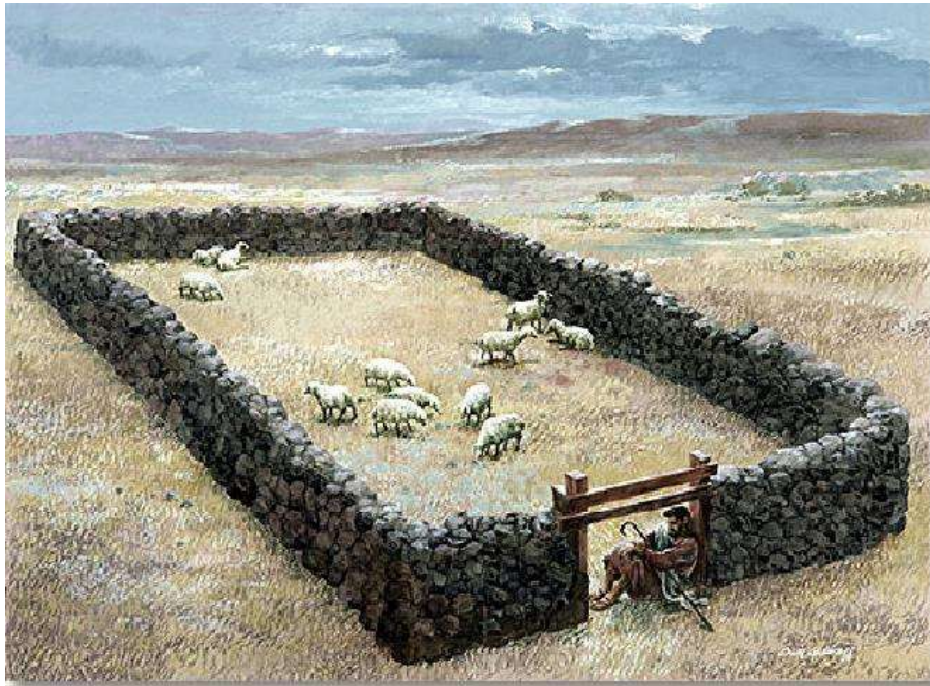


*Open Wide*  
Sunday School Lesson  
John 10:1-13  
December 21, 2025

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, that may be very true when studying this passage because when Jesus talks about being the gate of the sheep, he is being more literal than usual and his listeners understand better than we do because this is what an ancient sheepfold looked like:



As you can see, the shepherd is the physical gate that protects the sheep.

**Purpose Statement: To challenge our church and ourselves on the degree of openness.**

The author of today's lesson focuses on churches who sometimes become gate keepers of community. That is a bit of a stretch for me because this passage is about Jesus, not about us and I think it says some important things about Jesus. I'm going to borrow from Rev. Dr. Alyce McKenzie's sermon on this passage:

*In the Sunday school room of the church I attended as a child, there was that picture of Jesus with a lamb on his shoulders on the back wall. After a while I didn't really see it anymore. It was just a pleasant portrait on the back wall of our room. There it remains to the present day, in my mind and memory, a hazy, pleasant background picture of Jesus I thought was just meant to be comforting for children.*

*Unfortunately, that placement and purpose is the exact opposite of the way this image functions in the Gospel of John. It was meant to be at the forefront of readers' minds and it was not just intended to comfort. My colleague Roy Heller, who teaches Old Testament at SMU's Perkins School of Theology, often warns his classes not to "confuse familiarity with understanding." That warning came to mind this time when I read John 10:1-10, the passage*

*about Jesus as Good Shepherd. It turns out that the Good Shepherd is not an image intended to comfort children. It is an image intended to inspire the faith of adults in difficult times. It is an image meant to counter forces that would isolate them from each other and undermine their faith in Christ.*

*Suppose you time traveled back 20 centuries from that Sunday school room to one of the house churches to which John wrote his gospel. You've been evicted from the synagogue. Maybe you've stayed in Palestine despite the opposition to your faith from Jewish authorities. Maybe you've left Palestine to get away from the conflicts. In either case, you're meeting in a small group praying for strength to withstand popular opposition to your faith. Your brow is probably furrowed. And then you hear the leader read this passage in which Jesus promises, "I am the Good Shepherd."*

*If you were a Jewish Christian, these images would have helped you hold onto your heritage, even though you've been evicted from the synagogue because of your belief in Jesus. Your manna in the wilderness has become Jesus, the Bread of Heaven. Your light, symbol of the law, is now identified with Messiah to whom the Torah bore witness. The way promised to the one who follows God's wisdom and law is now identified with Jesus the Way (Koester 233; see below for full reference.) And the shepherd, a common sight across the ancient Mediterranean world and a common metaphor for leadership, is now Jesus the Good Shepherd.*

Each promise made in the seven "I am" statements says something about Jesus' identity and something about ours as individuals and communities when we live in relationship to him.

Listen to how the "I am" sayings serve to unify those who believe in Jesus.

- Since Jesus is food, discipleship means gathering around the table.
- Since Jesus is light, discipleship means coming out of our dark corners and gathering in the middle of the room together.
- Since Jesus is a path to follow, discipleship means walking together along it.
- Since Jesus is an eternal journey, discipleship means a group pilgrimage of walking in the way that leads to life.
- Since Jesus is the Vine, discipleship means being the branches, people whose lives derive their fruitfulness from him.
- Since Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then discipleship means being sheep who find their life and well-being in his care.

*All seven "I am" sayings are unified in the cross. None would be true without the cross.*

*I'm fine with Jesus as a Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us. But if I'm to find my identity in him, doesn't that mean that sacrifice for others will be required of me? The "I am" sayings promise to meet my basic needs. But their deeper message is that my most basic spiritual need is to give my life for something bigger than my life. And for that I need to hear Jesus say "I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep."*

Let us pray:

**God of light and life, we give thanks for Jesus, who shines in the darkness of our lives and brings us hope, restoration, and new life. Help us to recognize your presence at work in the world, and give us a holy boldness to share that good news with others. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.**