

# First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

“I Am the Gate”

Sunday, February 28, 2021

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor

## Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Welcome, Announcements and Opening Prayer

Good morning, friends. Welcome to worship on this second Sunday in Lent. Today is Sunday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, and we are delighted that you have tuned in to join us for worship.

Today, friends, I am thrilled to be sharing with you the news that the weather is finally warming up here in Michigan. The snow has begun to melt and because we are, hopefully, turning a warmer corner, I am thrilled to announce that we are worshiping together in two different ways each Sunday. Our online services, of course, continue each week, but our parking lot services have also resumed. These are the live worship services taking place Sunday at 10:00 a.m., and if you have not yet tried this style of worship where you listen to the service through your car radios, while you watch the service taking place live, I invite you to try this out. I invite you to please pre-register your vehicle through our church website, and you do need to pre-register for each Sunday you will be attending. But we hope you'll join us, in one way or another, each Sunday.

Friends, looking back for just a second, I want to thank everybody who made last week's congregational meeting happen and I am delighted to say that it ran absolutely smoothly without any tech issues. We did have a quorum and all motions were passed, meaning that our nominating committee, as provided and put forth, has been elected and they will now begin serving next month. It also means that pastors' terms of call were voted upon, based on the recommendations given, and were approved. This also means that our annual report is now together and available for anyone who wants to read through it. There is a copy online, but the full, unabridged copy is also available through the church office, or you could email Susan Underhill or Stu Dodge to request a copy to be sent to you.

Friends, these are our announcements, except for me to say one last thing that next Sunday, March 7<sup>th</sup>, is a special Sunday in the life of our church. It is our church anniversary Sunday. This year we're celebrating our 186<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation and to celebrate this great event we have some special surprises planned. We hope you will tune in online, or attend our parking lot service.

But now, as we prepare to listen to Ashley Ashley, who will be preaching for us this morning, Darlene Maginley and Mark Hovermale are here assisting, and the Joyful Ringers, our bell choir, will lead our music.

Let us move into worship first with prayer. Would you all please pray with me. Let us pray. Holy God, the wonders of your creation, the splendor of heaven, the beauty of the earth, and the inordinate richness of nature, all speak to us of your glory. The coming of your Son, the presence of your Spirit, the fellowship of your church, show us the depth of your love. We worship and adore you, dear God of grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. With humbleness of heart we confess our sins before you. We forget so often to love and serve you, we wander from your ways. We are careless of your world and put its life in danger.

We talk of our concern for others, but fail to match our words with actions. Lord, have mercy on us. Forgive our sins and bring us to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

**[Congregation sings “We Come, O Christ, To You” from June 2, 2019]**

### **Darlene Maginley, Director of Children’s Ministry – Children’s Message**

Hey kids, I am so excited to talk to you this week! Remember, last week, we talked about whenever Jesus said, “I Am,” it was a good thing. This week I am so excited to tell you Jesus is a gate! Isn't that fabulous!! Now, before you think I'm completely ridiculous, I'm going to prove to you that being a gate is a good thing.

So use your imaginations for a minute. Imagine it is the absolutely hottest day of the summer. All you can think about is jumping into a nice cool swimming pool and splashing around. So you drive to the swimming pool and there's a huge fence around it. What do you do? You look for the gate! You go through the gate, and you get to jump into the nice cool swimming pool.

Now Jesus is not the gate to the swimming pool. It's even better! Jesus tells the people when he's here on earth that He is the gate to heaven. He told the people if you want to get into the cool living waters of heaven, the way you do that is you go through the gate that's Jesus Christ. What he meant was when you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and when you believe that He came to earth and died and came back to life to save us from our sins, when you believe that, you have a way to open the gate to heaven.

Now Jesus also meant he was the gate in another way. He also was telling the people that you can't try to climb over a really tall fence to get into heaven and there's no back door to heaven. The only way to go to heaven is to go *through* Jesus Christ. You have to believe that he really is the Son of God, so the next time that you are thinking about jumping into that cool pool of water, remember that the cool living waters of heaven are available also.

Let's say a prayer together. Dear Jesus, we thank you so much for loving us enough you came to earth, you died for our sins, you came back to life, and you opened up a way for us to get from earth to heaven. We thank you for being the Son of God and for sending the Holy Spirit to our lives also. It's in your name that we say all of these things. Amen.

So, kids, open the gate and come on in!

### **Rev. Mark Hovermale – Reading of Scripture**

#### **John 10:7-10**

<sup>7</sup> Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

#### **Revelation 21:1-3; 25**

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new

Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

<sup>25</sup> On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

### **Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Sermon**

Friends, let us pray. Gracious and loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Although I grew up in what I would consider a fairly rural-like hometown, I have absolutely zero experience with farm life or farm animals of any kind. The only animal I have any knowledge of at all is a cat, and I don't think that's going to change anytime soon! While I have no experience on farms, I wouldn't be angry if Brendan and I ever decided to get chickens. I think they would be really fun.

What I lack in my own knowledge and experience, I make up for in curiosity. You see, I love to follow the blog of one of my friends and former roommate in college, Allie. She and her husband and her two children raise Icelandic sheep, among other kinds of fun critters, on their farm. Allie shares all about their mishaps and adventures on her blog, that she publishes weekly. Allie once posted a story about three of her sheep who escaped their pen. One afternoon the door had come loose and through some animal ingenuity the sheep managed to push the door open and then wander into the neighboring field. As Allie described them, she found them with their legs folded partly underneath, making their long spiraling wool drape lazily on each side, like the perfect little rugs that they seemed to be. A cute image!

Although the sheep appeared happy in this moment, their escape had led them away from the safety and security of Allie and her family. It was going to take a door provided by the shepherd to direct them towards what was good for them, both now and into the future.

Like Allie's three little guys, sheep in first century Israel were often kept outside in the pasture overnight, especially in the warmer summer months. The pen that was used was simply an enclosure of rocks. There was neither a roof nor door, but thorns growing on the rocks would kind of creep over the edge and help protect them from any wild animals that might be in the area. The shepherd would then lie down across the open entry of the pen and use their body as a barrier to help keep the sheep in and help keep predators out.

So when Jesus says in John, chapter 10, verse 7, "I am the gate for the sheep," we can assume that he was taking this image and applying it to himself. From this picture of a shepherd lying in the entrance, we would expect Jesus to be a kind of protector for the sheep. And certainly throughout scripture we see examples of God protecting and sustaining God's people. In the Old Testament we hear God's promise through the Prophet Isaiah,

"Do not fear for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you. When you pass through

the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, and the flames will not set you ablaze.”

The mention of water and fire here bring memories of God parting the Red Sea to deliver the Hebrew people from Pharaoh, and the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that led those very same people to the promised land. Story after story like these are what led the psalmist to declare that “God is my hiding place. God will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.” While this promise of protection is carried into the New Testament and certainly into the work of Jesus, it's developed here in this passage in a surprisingly unique way. Here we are called to *enter* through Jesus, a request that's not typically made of shepherds who are protecting their sheep. But the image as Jesus used it, seems less to be about a gate serving as a barrier for protection, and more so about a gate serving as a passageway into something new.

That something new is the life that we now have with God. In verse 9, Jesus expands upon his statement, saying, “I am *the gate*; whoever enters through me will be saved.” Jesus is referred to as the gate because he is the one who takes us to the Father. He is the access point to the Kingdom of God. He is the door to salvation and to eternal life. I think it's worth noting that in these three short verses, twice, Jesus names himself as *the gate*, and twice, he places himself opposite the ones who came to steal, kill and destroy.

Jesus even goes so far as to say that all who have come before him are thieves and robbers, but if we pause and pay attention to context, it seems that the word “all” here actually refers to a particular group, or at least those who act in a particular way. Jesus seems to be referring to any false messiahs or prophets who have claimed to speak for God. Additionally, the “all” is referring to the Pharisees who often appear as Jesus' adversaries. Throughout scripture, while not always as bold as the false prophets or messiahs, the Pharisees often claimed to have exclusive access to God and they acted sometimes as the mediators of salvation.

In the account directly leading up to our scripture passage for today, Jesus heals a man who was born blind. The man goes before the Pharisees to proclaim the miraculous act of mercy that Jesus has shown to him. As he praises Jesus for being a prophet of God, the Pharisees reject him openly. They question his reliability, discard him as nothing more than a man steeped in sin since birth, and they throw him out.

The man who was once blind is ridiculed because of his confession that Jesus is a man of God. Having rejected this as a possibility, the Pharisees see themselves as gatekeepers. This man's story goes against the one that they hold up as true, so they label him a sinner who does not belong in God's community. But the Pharisees are *not* the gatekeepers! Jesus alone is the gate and Jesus welcomes this man as a disciple, as a beloved child of God. The man chooses to enter through Jesus and because of this he will have life and he will have it to the fullest.

Jesus continues with his shepherd metaphor to describe what this new full life with God will look like. In verse 9 Jesus says that those who have entered through the gate will find pasture and this certainly brings up memories of Psalm 23 when God allows God's people to lie down in green pastures and he leads them beside still waters. Jesus offers us spiritual nourishment for the bread of life and living water, something I'm sure we will hear more about next week from Pastor Emily, as we explore Jesus' statement, “I am the bread of life.”

Jesus adds to this promise of abundance by also stating that we will be free to come in and go out. Now, as it turns out, this phrase is actually a common one in Hebrew, and was one that was used to describe a life that is absolutely secure and safe. With the life that Jesus offers, we do not need to be constantly looking over our shoulder or worrying about what lies ahead, because Jesus is watching over us and tending to all of our needs.

Finally, while Jesus has spoken repeatedly of the provision of nourishment and security, in verse 10 we come to what is not only the central message of this passage, but, friends, the central message of the entire gospel! Jesus has come so that all in the world can have life, a full life, an eternal life shared with God.

One commentator puts it this way, “ ‘Life to the full’ suggests fat, contented, happy, flourishing sheep.” It means that the life which Jesus’ true disciples get to enjoy is not to be simplified as just more time to fill, or eternal life, but life at its absolute best. To further drive home this point, in the Greek, the final phrase of our passage, “have it to the full” can also be translated as to have a super abundance of a thing. ‘Christ as the gate’ provides us passage to a super abundant life.

A passage describes what this absolute best or a super abundant life can look like in Revelation chapter 21. In it, John describes the new heaven and the new earth and all of its beauty and splendor. God descends from heaven to dwell directly with God's people again. Just like in Genesis, just like what was always intended to be, at this glorious reunion, verse 3 proclaims, “Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and He will dwell with them. They will be His people and God himself will be with them and God will be their God.” No longer will God and God's people be separated. Instead each will enjoy the presence of the other and then together they will relish in the beauty and splendor of this new heaven and this new earth. There'll be no more tears, no more death, no more pain, no more sin, and no more darkness, just the absolute best of life. A super abundance of God's love for all of God's people.

Friends, this is the life that Jesus is beckoning us into! Jesus serves as the gate, not so that he can keep us out, but so that Jesus can point us towards the way as the door between this life and the life to come. Jesus provides us with hope, with grace, with strength, and with the opportunity to experience some of the future right here and right now. Once we walk through that door, once we receive this eternal life, it is ours, both now and forever.

During this Lenten season I pray that these “I am” statements provide space for you to experience the presence of God in new and exciting ways, maybe deepen your knowledge of who God is. May they strengthen your faith in what God has in store for you today. May the promise that Jesus is the gate remind you that God not only wills abundance and security for your life, but that Jesus provides passage into a newer and fuller sense of what that abundance even means and looks like. May we remember the invitation extended by Christ alone to experience the absolute best of life, and the super abundance of God's love for each of us. Amen.

**[The Joyful Ringers Bell Choir plays – “Tranquility”]**

**Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor – Closing Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we praise you for giving shape and meaning to the ancient image of the shepherd in the person of Jesus Christ. In Him, your compassion and mercy have been eternally revealed. He stands as the gate, as the passageway.

Through him we experience an abundance of everlasting life and receive the opportunity to dwell with you in perfect harmony forever. The only proper response to this gift is praise and adoration. Together, we give thanks for the ways you reach out to us, the ways you use metaphors, stories, parables, and images to help us understand the depth of your goodness and love.

As we continue through Lent, we acknowledge that some of us might struggle to celebrate, even in the midst of hearing such good news. This morning, we lift up those who are suffering any form of physical pain, those who have a diagnosis for an illness, and for those who are awaiting an answer or a vaccine. Lord bring hope.

We lift up those struggling with their mental health, those plagued with anxiety or depression, for those with dark thoughts and restless minds. Lord, bring light.

We lift up those who are grieving, those who have suffered loss, and for those who are scared for the future. Lord, bring comfort.

We lift up those who experience social isolation and oppression, those who are addicted, those who are incarcerated, and for those who are abused. Lord, bring strength.

And we lift up those who offer care to all the ones listed above, for families, neighbors, and friends, the ones who willingly and graciously take on an extra load. Lord, bring peace.

You have shown us the way to full and abundant life. You have opened the door and beckoned us to draw near. May we heed your calling and may we share that calling with others.

Allow us to draw closer to one another and to you, oh God, as we recite together the words Christ has taught us to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen.

### **Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Benediction and Blessing**

Friends, as we go from this place, may we carry with us the knowledge that Jesus is the gate, remembering that Jesus makes way for us to enter into the Kingdom of God and believing in the abundant life that is offered to us, both now and forever.

And may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and forever give you peace. Amen.