



Sermon from  
April 26, 2026  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Pastor Amy Vigesaa

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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When our oldest son, Soren, was 5 years old, it was time for kindergarten. At the time, we lived in Bemidji on a short side street made of gravel that stood adjacent to the grocery store on that end of town and not too far from the railroad tracks. There was a much larger, newer development just a block away. When we found out the school's bus route, we learned that we were one of the final stops which meant Soren wouldn't be on the bus too long, but the bus would also be full by the time it reached our street. But here we were, sending our first child off to school and we watched teary-eyed as he stood at the bus stop waiting. When the bus approached, we could see that it was almost full. We encouraged Soren to sit up toward the front near the bus driver if there was an open seat. Our bus driver was a nice man, but not at all extroverted or proactive in helping a young child find their way. We asked if he could help him find a seat and he gestured over his shoulder. That's how helpful he was. Soren found an edge to balance on, the bus door closed and off they went. We watched as Soren looked for us, eyes wide. That's when Hans jumped in our minivan and followed the bus all the way to school, parked, and got out on the sidewalk

to greet Soren with a hug as he got off the bus. This is the routine that followed every day after for a week, when we decided Hans could just give Soren a ride to school. We want our kids to feel safe; to be comfortable; to be brave; but mostly to be safe. And we know, at least there is a greater chance of that when they are within our proximity.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, but there are actually two metaphors identifying Jesus in this reading: the Shepherd and the Gate. But Good Shepherd Sunday sounds better than Gate Sunday, so there we go. It's a little odd that within the same discourse, Jesus uses two I Am statements. The I Am statements of the gospel of John, are phrases Jesus uses to describe himself, like I Am the Light of the World, I Am the Bread of Life, I Am the Living Water, and today: I Am the Good Shepherd. I Am the Gate. (It's actually "door", but gate makes more sense with a sheep pen.) These I Am statements trace all the way back to the book of Exodus when Moses meets God at a burning bush. Through the fire, Moses has a conversation with God and he asks for God's name. God responds with "I Am who I Am." And so, it became known that God's name is the Great "I Am." Jesus was connecting himself with this name in each of these I Am statements in John, explaining what kind of God the Great I Am is. So today, we discover that one image is of a shepherd- which wouldn't have been a new understanding, right? We heard Psalm 23 sung today by the choirs. We heard the words, "The Lord is my Shepherd." The Gate, however, is a bit harder to understand especially for our modern ears. The two images go hand in hand though, so let's dig in a bit.

In order to get some context for what Jesus is talking about, we first need to know what comes before this portion of scripture because this is a response to that. In the previous chapter of John, Jesus healed a man blind from birth. This should've been cause for celebration, but instead the religious leaders of the day- the Pharisees- interrogated the man about how he was healed, who healed him, what he thought about Jesus and where Jesus was. In the end, the Pharisees kicked the man out of the synagogue for his belief in Jesus, not allowing him to come back in. Jesus sought him out. Upon finding the man, now healed, now able to see, but removed from the community of faith, Jesus asked him if he believed and brought him into his own community of faith. The Pharisees were not good shepherds. They also were playing the part of gatekeeper, shutting people out for disagreeing with them and challenging their authority. Jesus, on the other hand, is the Good Shepherd and the Gate that opens and closes allowing for both safety and freedom for those who believe. Let's remember what a gate is for- it's not simply for shutting things in or keeping things out, it is also an entrance to the pastureland, this beautiful place of abundance, nourishment, and life.

But, nevermind that, as human beings, we tend to focus on lesser things. Instead of guarding against true predators- the thieves and bandits that seek to steal, kill and destroy- we focus on what sheep are allowed in the pen and who is able to part of the flock. It is important then to remember the truth laid out for us in John 3:16, that "God so loved the world." In its entirety, no exclusions. But we tend to get fixated on our safety, so we keep people out who are different from us or who we disagree with, we close doors on those who mess up and make mistakes, and we protect ourselves. I get it, the world is a scary place

sometimes. But here's the thing: that's not our job. It's the job of the Shepherd to protect and guard the sheep. Our part is to stay in close proximity to the Shepherd. It's the job of the gate to open and close- to open to green pastures, to close out the dangers that threaten. Our part is to go where the Shepherd leads.

There is a nuance to the Gate that we might not know since most of us aren't shepherds. It seems a little strange that Jesus would use two metaphors to describe himself in the text, but he does and here's a possible reason why. There is some evidence that shepherds would use their own bodies as the gate to the sheepfold, situating themselves at the entrance. The shepherd would literally sit or lie down in the gap of the wall allowing them better control of access and positioning themselves to monitor the well-being of the sheep. This way, anything or anyone who wanted to get in or out would have to cross over the body of the shepherd to do so. I think it's a good picture for us. Jesus puts his own body between his sheep and any danger. The Shepherd is the Gate.

1 Peter 2:24-25 reminds us,

“<sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”

Our souls... Jesus prioritizes our spiritual safety and security, while we tend to focus on our physical safety. Just like my husband following the bus to school, Jesus is attentive to our safety. My husband and I weren't overly concerned for our son's physical safety- we knew he would get to school just fine. We were

more concerned about his fear as he was out of proximity from the ones he knew he could trust to keep him safe. Jesus is the one we can trust to have genuine concern for us. Jesus is the one we can trust to have our safety and well-being at the center of his attention. Because as the Shepherd, he is invested. As the Shepherd, he has a relationship. As the Shepherd, he willingly puts his life on the line for the sake of the sheep. As theologian Rodger Nishioka says, “The safest space on earth is to be at the center of God’s will.” Whether we are in the pen or out in the pasture, our proximity to the Shepherd is our best defense. We are to stay close to the Shepherd, listen for his voice, and follow his lead. This isn’t only for our survival, it is for fullness of life. Jesus promises abundant life as we enter through Him in faith. He provides a peace that enables us to come and go freely without concern or fear. Like Psalm 23 tells us, we will lie down in green pastures, walk along quiet waters, even in the darkest valley we will have no fear, for our Shepherd-God is with us. He restores our souls so we can know the fullness of life. This life he offers is not about material abundance. This is not about a good life filled with stuff. This is not about prosperity. This is about proximity. This is about relationship. We can know abundant life as we stay close to Jesus; as we come to rely on God; when we learn to trust the Savior. This abundant life will look a lot like a meadow and a stream, a table and good food. It will sound like a voice we know, that’s kind and caring. It will feel like goodness and mercy, love and community. The best place to be is with the Shepherd. He’s the way to abundant life. The Shepherd is the gate.

Amen.

*Welcoming in Christ. Growing in Faith. Responding in Love and Service.*