

# No Stranger

April 26, 2026

Acts 2:42-47

John 10:1-10

Chapters nine and ten do a lot of heavy lifting in the Gospel of John – that is, they are packed with event and import and tension and meaning. It's not the most poetic writing in the Gospel – I think we have to say that "In the beginning was the Word" gets the poetry prize – but it is poetic. It's got a lot of moving characters. John started with Jesus and his disciples and introduced a man who had been blind from birth, then brought in some of Jerusalem's senior Pharisees and a gathering crowd. The healed man was questioned, his parents were questioned, Jesus was questioned.

As is usual in John's Gospel, the story begins with a miraculous sign, continues through an extended discussion – which here is pretty much an argument – and leads to one of Jesus' "I am" statements. Unusually for John's Gospel, chapters nine and ten have one sign and at least two extended dialogues, but three "I am" statements.

Jesus said the first one before even performing the miraculous sign. "I am the light of the world," he said, and then applied the healing mud to the man's eyes. The second appears in the passage read just now: "I am the gate for the sheep." That's not so well known, though John Narruhn preached a great sermon about that a couple years ago and folks remembered it during Bible Study.

The third follows this passage right at the beginning of verse 11: "I am the good shepherd."

That's a lot of "I am" for one sign and a couple conversations. This passage is doing a lot of heavy lifting. Not everybody was up for it.

Jaime Clark-Soles writes at Working Preacher, "Here John showcases Jesus' habit of conveying truth not propositionally, but poetically. Jesus carries on about sheepfolds, gates, thieves, sheep, and gatekeepers, strangers, and voices. After five verses he pauses and notes that they haven't got any idea what he's talking about (v. 6). So, what is an effective speaker to do at that point? Explain the figure of speech (paroimia)? Drop the use of metaphor? Apologize for using such elevated speech and dumb things down, put it all in simplistic terms? Maybe. But that's certainly not what our Lord and Savior did. Rather, he again (v. 7, *palin*) throws out the same word-pictures. The whole Gospel of John is nothing if not a piling up of metaphors, figures of speech. How else are we to convey truth about God? What single image, what single word could suffice? Plain speech (*parresia*) is fine as far as it goes (see 16:26, 29) – but it can't go far enough to 'explain' God."

If you're having trouble following, you're in good company, because Jesus was trying to describe the indescribable, explain the unexplainable. I have a lot of sympathy. For the last couple weeks people have been saying to me, "You must be so proud about your daughter's ordination." I say yes, because I am.

"Proud," however, is at one and the same time the right word and the wrong word. It's too little a word to encompass all the love I have for Rebekah and her brother Brendan. It doesn't quite include the satisfaction I have as a church leader to see a talented and capable person accepted into the ranks of leadership. It doesn't begin to account for the fears I have for someone I love who will be disappointed many times by the likely failures of the church to fully appreciate her gifts, or that people will discount her for her gender, sexuality, her age, her disability, her ordination (yes, that counts against folks in some areas of life), or simply the fact that she's blond. I'm her dad. I worry about those things.

There's no word for all that. No one word. I just wrote 132 words and, you know what? Those didn't do it, either.

So what can we tease out of all these words Jesus spoke in these ten verses of John?

The point of a sheepfold is to protect the lives of the sheep. Sheep can't stay in an enclosure all the time – they'll eat everything in sight pretty rapidly – but they're safer from the overnight dangers in the sheepfold. It's not perfect. Jesus warned of thieves and bandits, after all, some of whom trying to imitate a legitimate gatekeeper, and some of them climbing over the walls.

We're familiar with that, aren't we? We know the risks of burglars and of con artists, the ones who use threats of violence to extract things from us, and the ones who pretend to be someone trustworthy to tease our resources from us.

We know the suffering of people whose spouses or parents abuse them. We know the oppression of people whose governments decide that a group of people will not be protected, indeed will be abused, by the very ones who claim rightful authority. Christians have been an oppressed minority in some places at some times. The spectacle of Christians encouraging and participating in the abuse of people at the margins is a betrayal of everything Jesus taught and lived, and a moral injury to the Church.

Gatekeepers let sheep into the sheepfold, and out again to pasture. It's a vital role. In the case of actual sheep, they don't have the limbs to open a gate. Somebody has to do it for them. In the human world, plenty of people can function as gatekeepers, so the question really becomes: how do we know who to let in and let out? There's an artist named David Hayward, a former pastor, whose work looks closely at this question, because let's face it, the Church in many ages has been much better at closing the gates on people than opening them. In so much of Hayward's art, the figure of Jesus embraces a sheep that has been rejected by the rest of the flock, who watch in confusion as Jesus comforts the one they discarded.

As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, “‘I am the gate.’ Not, ‘I am the wall, the barrier, the enclosure, the dividing line.’ Not, ‘I am that which separates, isolates, segregates, and incarcerates.’ I am the gate. The door. The opening. The passageway. The place where freedom begins.”

“The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Who will we trust to admit us to a safe sheepfold, and who will we trust to open the gate to a fruitful pasture? One whose voice we know, or whose form we recognize, or whose familiar touch wakes us from our sleep. Last week I spoke of recognizing Jesus as the one who feeds us. This week that’s still true – the gate swings open to the grasslands where the sheep graze.

We recognize Jesus also as the one who protects us: protects us from sin by teaching us good ways, by setting an example to follow, and most of all by forgiving us when we fail to follow lessons or example. Jesus protects us from death by opening a new gate to life. Jesus protects us from evil by giving us resources to keep it from taking over our hearts. I wish I could say that Jesus protects us from the evil acts of others, but Christian history abounds with martyrs who suffered, and so may we. When we maintain our sense of grace and refuse to let evil into our spirits, Jesus stands with us.

We recognize Jesus as one who welcomes more and more into the flock, into the sacred community. In verse 16 of this chapter, he said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” We know the voice of the shepherd and the gatekeeper because it keeps calling new people to join us. If we were to close the gate and bar it, if we were to stand upon the walls and defend them against any trying to join us, if we were to declare ourselves the be-all and end-all of Christianity, well. We would not be growing or thriving, would we?

Most of all, we would have replaced Jesus’ voice of welcome with our voice of rejection. At that point, can we call ourselves followers of Jesus at all?

Every gate on this campus makes a sound when it moves. There’s the ringing clang when it closes and shuts, and when it’s closed, small children have a more difficult time before running out into traffic, and that’s a good thing. There’s a bit of a squeal when it opens, and when it’s opened, we come in to worship, to enjoy a meal, to play a game, to comfort a grieving friend, to learn something new, or to make some decisions about the future.

That’s a voice of Jesus I recognize. As I recognize it in our words of welcome, and our efforts to protect or comfort our needy neighbors. There’s the voice of Jesus. No stranger to us at all.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*