

May 1, 2020  
St. John's Episcopal Church Reflection Series  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
John 10:1-10

### Doors, Loneliness, and Sheep

Hello, my name is Sally Hansen, and I attend St. John's Episcopal Church in New Haven. A big thanks to Bill Rowley for getting this reflection series going during this time of separation.

I'm going to talk briefly about doors, loneliness, and sheep, then I'll pray.

I've been noticing doors more than usual lately. This is partly because I've been living in a different space—the past few weeks I've been staying at my parents' new house in rural Virginia. The glass sliding door to the porch is always smeared with our dog's muddy pawprints. The wooden door to the laundry room won't close unless you pull hard toward your hip and then up until it clicks twice. The door to my bedroom catches the draft from the window and slams in the night if I'm not careful.

But of course I'm conscious of doors for other reasons—our boundaries and portals have become sites of danger, fear, and frustration these days. I now touch the door handle into the little local grocery with my sleeve pulled down over my hand, or with a paper towel. When I touch my car handle, I'm very aware that my brother and dad have also both touched that handle today. For many of us living in tight quarters, the door seems to grow thicker and our space more stifling every day.

Sometimes the loneliness can't get out of us. Many of us are banging our heads against the closed opportunities, the impermeable unknowns, and the heavy loads falling on our neighbors. God, why is this happening? And I find myself flailing against the surfaces of my own small cruelties. I close away from the people who love me most, and start to suffocate in the shame of it. Why am I still this way? Behind it all, grief and fear grow as more and more people in New Haven and around the world die of this terrible disease.

It is hard for us to hold these things. Our longings for freedom and for communal safety are at odds. In the exhaustion of it all, it's been easy for me to lose touch with tenderness.

And here in John 10, we have Jesus saying, "I am the door for the sheep" (John 10:7, English Standard Version). "Door" is also translated as "gate" (New Revised Standard Version). He goes on, "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:9-10, NRSV). What do we do with this?

Can you think of a time when someone, perhaps a parent, a teacher, or a wise friend—just unlocked you? Maybe you cried, maybe you felt the ground under your feet for the first time in months. Maybe you felt like anything could happen. In these moments of being seen and loved

down to our depths, our emptiness somehow changes to capacity. What was once dull, painful repetition becomes a kind of dance.

Just a chapter before this, Jesus touches a man who had been isolated for a long time. He had been born blind. Jesus mixes mud and touches his eyes, tells him to wash in the quiet waters and be healed. But even as the world in full color opens to the man, the local Pharisees close him out from the temple, his whole worshipping community, for testifying to their competitor. But Jesus accosts them: in their jealousy, they shut out only themselves. He insists, "*I am the door.*" He is our confrontation and our comfort, our protector and liberator. So often the thief is as close as our own thoughts. But Jesus' love for us is as unassailable as it is gentle. He hunts down every single lonely one of us, and shoulders us back to one another.

Still, there is no evidence that the man born blind was readmitted to the temple community. And like him, we are faced with the world: the real embodied experience of grief, injustice, loneliness, and limitation. And Jesus commands us to weep with those who weep because he also wept and is weeping for his children. He tells us to be with him by calling our lonely neighbors and to feed him by delivering food. He keeps vigil with us as we keep vigil for the jobless and the sick. And at his last supper, facing down his own death, Jesus prays that we all may be one, together, with each other and with him.

The abundant life is not our personal pastoral paradise, but our entrance into the total way Jesus loves, cross and all. Our only freedom is with the flock, and our only safety is with the one who became like a lamb. We believe that Jesus robbed that greatest thief, death, and unleashed onto us all eternal life in love, the lush pastures. Until we see it, we follow our shepherd's voice.

Sisters and brothers at St. John's, you are praying for one another and for our neighbors around the world, and the love radiating from you is palpable from this house in Virginia. Jesus' protective, freeing power is alive in your care. Let it stir us to an ever-deepening love for one another, and for our Maker who give us every moment of this life.

Collect of the Day:

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.