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Trinity Episcopal Church

Acts 2: 42 -47
1 Peter 2: 19 – 25

Psalm 23
John 10: 1 – 10

Some of the most picturesque things about Scotland are all the green hillsides, some rolling and gentle, others craggy and rock-strewn with steep cliffs. Almost always, they are dotted with fluffy white, black or tan sheep. As pretty as this imagery might be, there is a dark side to it. In the 18th and 19th centuries, wealthy landowners, both English and Scottish, moved all the dirt-poor tenant farmers off of the lands in order to bring in sheep, which were much more profitable. These evictions were known as “the Clearances.” As a result, to this day, there are vast stretches of Scottish countryside where there is nary a trace of human habitation, except the old stone walls which were parts of fences and cottages. But there are thousands of sheep grazing contentedly without a predator in sight (except automobiles).

While there are lots of sheep, there aren’t very many shepherds in Scotland, at least not ones who go out in the fields with the flocks and watch over them. That job’s been turned over to border collies who take their responsibilities very seriously. But there are still sheep farmers who are deeply concerned about the welfare of their flocks and each individual sheep. And there are still sheep pens that consist of low, stacked stone walls with – and sometimes without – gates. Sheep are marked with spray paint so if they go astray, they can be identified as belonging to a particular crofter, or farmer. Sheep are good at straying. Perhaps that spray painted mark is *not so very* different from the oil and the sign of the cross that is placed on each of our heads at baptism – to identify us as God’s even when we go astray. Every farmer’s distinct whistle and call are known by each of the farmer’s sheep and by the border collie. Neither animal will respond to anyone else, and the sheep, at least, will run from strangers.

On the island of Iona, off the southwest coast of Scotland, sheep are the primary farm product, and they are everywhere. Most homes have fences and gates around them, not to keep sheep in, but to keep errant sheep *out* of gardens and *off* of lawns. And even though Iona is a small place, there is an interesting array of different gates and stiles. Remember the nursery rhyme about the crooked man who walked a crooked mile, he found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked stile? A stile is a form of a gate that involves steps which allow humans, but not animals, to climb over low rock walls, or sometimes through hedgerows.

Sheep are not so different from people in that the grass always seems greener on the other side of the fence, and they want to go where life looks more abundant. There are wide open areas on Iona where sheep are allowed to graze, with wire fences that run along the boundaries. The fences help keep sheep away from dangerous, rocky cliffs because that seems to be where sheep (and sometimes people) want to wander.

People are allowed to hike just about anywhere on Iona, just as in the UK in general, because they have a very different concept of property rights. But throughout the UK, there is a standing rule: if you’re hiking through pastures and you find a gate open, you leave it open. If you find a gate closed, you close it after you walk through it. The farmer has a reason for the gate being as it is. Gates are something you become very conscious of on the island. Gates give you access to places. They are like doorways to new adventures, a new part of the journey.

Not all of the sheep pens or sheep folds on Iona – where the sheep spend the night – have gates. Because it just so happens that those wonderful border collies, who have replaced human shepherds, are trained to sit in the opening between the sheep in the pen and the great beyond. Exactly like Jesus talks about himself being the gate. Two thousand years later, there is still someone who is positioned in the opening in the stone wall to watch over the coming in and the going out of the sheep. Even though there are probably no sheep rustlers, thieves or bandits on Iona, and even though there are no coyotes or wolves, there is a four-legged shepherd that stands watch through the night, to ensure that the sheep don't wander out into the darkness.

Gates, of course, have two sides. From inside the sheep pen looking out, there is the view of an abundant life of grazing on lush, green grass polka-dotted with tiny yellow and white flowers and sweet clover. There is room to romp and play. There are pools of fresh rain water from which to sip. There are places to graze and places to snooze, totally apart from everyone else. There is a great deal of freedom. There seems to be nothing left to want.

From the other perspective, that is from the outside looking in through the gate, there is also a view of abundant life. The security of the four walls. Perhaps a roofed area to be under as protection from wind or rain. No automobiles. No unknown persons. No false shepherds wandering through. There is food in abundance when the pastures are not so lush. There is the company of family and friends. There is the coziness of snuggling next to the warm fleece of your kith and kin when the storms and gales of the world come along.

The means of access between these different views of abundant life is, of course, the gate. Or the border collie. Or the shepherd. Or Jesus. God is indeed the one who watches over our coming in and our going out. God is the one who provides the pastures and the right pathways, the one who seeks us when we have gone astray and gotten ourselves stranded on a cliff ledge. God is the one who rescues us with the crook of the staff. God is the one who spreads the table with luscious, delightful little flowers, sweet clover and tender blades of grass, or fills our trough with overflowing abundance. God is the one, the only one, who truly provides security. God is the one who has set us into the flock, the community, and yet knows the uniqueness of each of us, and knows our need for both solitude and companionship, security and freedom. We are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture. Just as the shepherd's priorities are for the welfare of the sheep, so are God's priorities for the welfare of the people of God. It is through God that we find our safety and fulfillment. To turn that around, God is our means of access, our portal, our wormhole, our gate to abundant life no matter which side of the gate we are on.

So many of the people around us in our daily lives are searching for that abundant life. Perhaps even some of us, because we haven't yet dared to go through that gate and trust God with our lives and everything else. We have found out that what the world says is important is decidedly not life-giving, and we seek something more. We are looking for grace; we are looking for love; we are looking for that voice that knows our every need and our very personal name. We are looking for God, because in all our wanderings, no matter how lush the pastures, there is nothing else that will really satisfy our soul. It turns out that it is only in relationship with God that the flowers and the grasses, the comfort and the safety, and the companionship of the rest of the flock have any meaning.

Abundance really is all around us, though it doesn't always look like what we think it should. In a very material sense, every one of us lives a life of abundance in comparison to the rest of the world. According to statistics from a stewardship publication from several years ago, if we have food in the

refrigerator, clothes on our backs, a roof over our heads and a place to sleep, we are richer than 75% of the world. If, additionally, we have money in the bank, money in our wallets and some spare change in our car or on our dresser, we are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy. The images of Jesus as shepherd and gate speak very graphically to us about our dependence on God for all that we have and all that we are, but they also speak volumes about what abundant life *really* looks like, as opposed to the world's definition. Abundant life from Jesus' perspective means a life that overflows at the boundaries, a life that continually passes through the grace of God, a life that rests in the care of God, a life of vulnerability lived out as love for God and for one another and especially for the least of these.

Knowing that Jesus watches over us and protects us in all our comings and goings speaks to our deepest yearnings. We spend so much of our lives standing in the door to the sheep fold, trying to decide between the known versus the unknown, the familiar and comfortable versus the wide open and mysterious. But if we know that the gate in between these choices is Jesus, then going through the gate in either direction leads us to wholeness and to a new way of living and being. We know that there is plenty of true abundance waiting for us on both sides, and we can enter – or exit – knowing that we are in the care of the one who knows and loves us best. Alleluia! +