

**Ego Eimi, Part 2: “I am the gate/good shepherd”
by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Countryside Community Church (UCC)
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I. The Gate

John’s gospel is quite different from Matthew’s, Mark’s, or Luke’s on quite a number of levels. First, as Chris acknowledged last week, it was written latest – probably seventy years after Jesus’s death, and about thirty years after the most recent one before it. Second, because it was written later, the interest of the gospel writer, whom we call John but really nobody knows for sure – is quite different from the other three. Whereas the first three gospels endeavor to set down something like a historical biography of Jesus’s life, by the time John’s Gospel was written there was no need for that. Three biographies had been written already. So what John set out to do is less about depicting the *man* of Jesus in history, as the *meaning* of Jesus in eternity.

You hear this move from man to meaning reflected all the time in John’s gospel, especially in the famous “ego eimi” (“I am”) statements that are unique to his gospel: “I am the bread of life”; “I am the vine”; “I am the light of the world;” “I am the gate”; “I am the good shepherd”; “I am the resurrection and the life.”

There was likely another significant motivation in John’s Gospel for focusing on the meaning of Jesus more than the man. Likely none of the Christians in John’s community had ever met the historical Jesus. Yet doubtless, most or all of them had met Jesus in another form: in his higher identity as the Holy Spirit. The New Testament is chock full of testimonies of encounters with the Holy Spirit after Jesus dies. Significantly, the terms “Holy Spirit” and “Spirit of the Living Christ,” and “Spirit of Jesus” are all used pretty much interchangeably, suggesting that the early Christian community saw no difference between Jesus, now in spiritual form, and the Holy Spirit.

In other words, while the Gospel of John inserts Jesus into a vaguely historical context, what John and his community are really writing about is their ongoing, present-day experience of Jesus, in his higher form as Holy Spirit. And they are hoping that through writing about such encounters, you and I might encounter the Holy Spirit, too.

In this sense, what John and his community are doing is really little different than what many of you have done after the death of a loved one – though you may not have written a gospel! Many have told me how you are convinced that one or another loved one has reached out to you beyond the grave. Some have received advice; others have received reminders that they are loved. In any case, I’ve heard enough of these stories – and experienced a few things firsthand, myself – to overcome my years of skepticism. I now believe it is possible for a great many people to reach back into this life from beyond the grave, at least for a short period of time, though in some cases much longer.

So if life beyond the grave is able to impact life this side of the grave in some way, under certain circumstances, imagine what it must have been like for Jesus's many disciples after he died! Surely, Jesus would have been capable of reinserting himself back into our world on a broader scale, with many times the ability, and with far more impact than ordinary folks.

Many believe that the Spirit of the Living Christ is still the one you meet today when you call upon the name of Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. Jesus comes to us from dimensions far higher than our own and therefore he had capabilities of responding in ways we can scarcely imagine to the many who call on his name.

Now imagine the Christian community at the end of the First Century comparing notes over not just months but *decades* of interaction with Jesus, taking special notes of common themes to the messages and common modes by which the messages were communicated. Then imagine someone writing this all down, using bits and pieces of the historical narrative of Jesus to weave it all together.

Welcome to the Gospel of John.

So when I hear Jesus say, "I am the gate for the sheep," or "I am the Good Shepherd," I do a little re-translation in my mind: "The Holy Spirit – or the Spirit of Jesus - is the gate for the sheep," "the Holy Spirit – or the Spirit of Jesus – is the Good Shepherd."

How does this little re-translation change things? Well, let's take the passage about the gate, substituting "Spirit" or "Holy Spirit" wherever Jesus refers to himself: "Very truly, I tell you, **[The Spirit is] the gate for the sheep**. All who came before [the Spirit] are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. [The Spirit is] the gate. Whoever enters by [way of the Spirit] will be saved, and they will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. [The Spirit] came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

If John's Gospel is about the Spirit, and not just about the historical Jesus, then I find myself directly challenged by his Gospel in ways that the other Gospels do not. For instance, if I'm reading that Jesus claimed that he is the gate for the sheep, his claim may mean very little to me since I have no direct knowledge of how his life and ministry may have acted as such a gate. But if I'm reading that the Holy Spirit is the gate for the sheep, and the Holy Spirit is something we all have access to up to this day, now I am directly confronted with the question: Have I had any first-hand experiences of the holy that have drawn me into this place? Did I show up here this morning in response to the Spirit's call, or am I here out of habit (or because someone told me to get my rear end in a pew)? And if it's the Holy Spirit of Jesus who got me in here this morning, what might he want to do with me now that I'm here?

Why are you here at Countryside Community Church? Because someone told you to come, or because you were led here by the Holy Spirit? Why are you a Christian? Because someone told you to be one or because you heard the voice of the Living Christ calling you?

II. The Good Shepherd

An important part about being a sheep is having a safe and protected shelter from wolves and thieves that a sheepfold provides. But the sheep would have no great or fulfilling life if they only entered into an enclosure and stayed there, no matter how safe it was. Sheep delight in roaming the hills, not lying in protected shelters. With a good and able shepherd the sheep may leave the enclosure and roam far and wide.

Same thing in the Christian community. We need an “enclosure” to come into – a safe and protected space where we can simply be ourselves, in the company of others whose faith is similar to our own, where we don't feel challenged so much as supported and encouraged on our faith journeys. Yet we aren't meant to spend the majority of our time in here. We are meant to take our faith with us into the wider world.

Of course, just as there are plenty of predators out beyond the sheepfold just waiting for an inattentive shepherd to lose focus, so the sheep may be ravaged, there are plenty of dangers waiting outside the faith community that can erode, cheapen, or corrupt one's faith and destroy one's values. Just ask how compatible your faith and values are with the television and movies you watch, the social media you access, the political candidates you either vote for or oppose, or your work environment. It's a tough, dangerous, even predatory world out there!

How do the sheep survive outside the fold?

Sheep do not survive long in the wilderness without a shepherd. And if the historical Jesus played shepherd for his flock two thousand years ago and then simply died and went away, then we who inhabit the fold of Jesus have no hope other than to batten down the hatches of our sheepfold and hunker down for the long run. Yet if our Good Shepherd is truly the Good Shepherd we've been imagining him to be this morning, as Holy Spirit, then there is not only great hope that we are being called into the pasture, but given the times we live in, it is certain we are being called there to roam in the Spirit's presence.

Just the other day, I was struck by how different the times are that we live in compared to just 70 years ago as I read the words of Dwight Eisenhower, which were painted on a sign on a Copenhagen street. Don't the following words sound revolutionary by today's standards?

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone; it's spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hope of its children.” – President Eisenhower, April 16, 1953

I think I can hear the Good Shepherd calling us out of our protective shelters with those words, to graze on the high hills of righteousness. Can you?

Friends, in the coming weeks, months, and years, I am sure that there will be quite a number of calls we hear, exhorting us to leave the warmth and safety of our familiar sheepfold to take a stand in the grassy hills for some great and worthy cause. We will all be hearing so many that it will be difficult to negotiate which ones to follow and which to not.

Yet as Christians, we should know a couple of things about discernment: That the people who do the most harm are not those who commit the most evil, but rather those who do the wrong good: that is, something that is perfectly good for *others* to do but not for they themselves to do, or something that is the right good but the wrong time to do it.

Don't let the Good Shepherd catch you doing the wrong good! How do you know it's the right good? The right good is the good that you specifically hear the Shepherd calling you to do. If you hear the Shepherd's voice, why would you want to do anything else? And if you do not hear the Shepherd's voice, why would you want to do anything but wait to hear it? Stay attentive to the voice and you'll hear it eventually.

Finally, lest I embarrass myself by stating the obvious: We as a congregation did hear the Good Shepherd calling us into a beautiful green pasture a couple years ago, and so far as I can tell, the Shepherd is still standing on that hill. Now, more than ever before, our work with the Tri-Faith Initiative constitutes the fertile ground in which some of our best faith and justice work will be accomplished. I believe the Shepherd is calling us to graze here at this particular time, to meet not only our needs but the needs of many – needs that may become greater in the future.

Sometimes it is sexier to look for new projects the Good Shepherd calls us to undertake. But if you don't hear his voice calling you to one of those other projects, you may want to consider turning your gaze backward to look at the pasture that is already beginning to grow. My best guess is that in the coming years the green pasture of the Tri-Faith Initiative will play a far larger role in all of our lives than we have ever imagined it, and it will stand even more boldly than that sign in Copenhagen as an inspiration to the world.