*Thieves and Bandits*

John 10:1-10

The image of Jesus as Good Shepherd is a familiar, favorite image by many Christians. We know this image of the shepherd being one who cares for his flock, watching over them and making sure they are safe in the fold. A great image! But I would like to focus for a few minutes on the other image in this passage: Jesus as the gatekeeper. How can that image inform inform our understanding of who Jesus is? And what lies within the gate that Jesus tends? I am sure we all have memories of gates that we have encountered in our lives. There are gates that are intended to keep us out and gates that are intended to keep us in. There are gates that lead to wonderful experiences such as those at theme parks, zoos, and other special attractions. There are gates that are formidable, locked, secretive, gates of the rich, gates of prisons, gates that are only opened certain hours, gates to the white house, etc. Almost anywhere you go you will find a gate of some sort.

On our way up north from the Detroit area, there is a billboard that claims that Clare, Michigan is the gateway to the north. It’s as if once you pass Clare, you are in some magical land, a special place unique from down south. I think I have to agree. There is something about “up north” that holds a special sense of life that one can’t find in the southern part of the state. It’s as if someone switched off the frenetic, fastpace rush of everyday living. Both Joe and I felt the tensions of our hectic life begin to disappear as we got nearer and traveled beyond that “gateway to the north”. Down south we found neighbors squabbling, dogs barking, traffic out of town horrendous, construction going on all the time, parents yelling at their kids, horns honking incessantly. The sounds of civilization continue all hours of the night. Sure some of those things happen “up north”, but something is very different. There is more of a sense of peace and relaxation in the sounds of nature and an “easy going” pace to life. Sounds of civilization are often drowned out by the sounds of nature. Up North a quiet spot can always be found, a cup of coffee sipped in the solitude of the morning. Up there problems seem solvable, the world looks different and full of opportunity. It is easy to gain a new perspective on things. The “Gateway to the North” leads to a chance to clear the air and proceed with the journey of life refreshed and inspired.

Perhaps those images of “up north” can be used as an analogy of what is within the gate that Jesus keeps. We like to laugh and make jokes about the gate to heaven, who gets in, who does not, but the gate that Jesus keeps is much more than the one we encounter at the end of our lives. . Jesus is the gatekeeper of our faith, pulling us safely into the fold to be refreshed, comforted, strengthened and loved so that we can go back out of the gate into the world to do the work of living out our faith in the world. Within the fold, we find an “up north” sense of life. When we are within the gate, within the fold, we find rest for our souls and have the ability to find fresh perspective on our problems and struggles. Within the gate we find guidance and nurture, peace and joy as we walk with Jesus. We find understanding and meaning.

But I think most of us just put our feet through the gate and hang near the edge peeking and catching glimpses of what the other side is all about. We don’t need to go very far into the fold to find a little bit of rest from this sometimes hectic and worrisome world. Near the gate we find brief moments of inspiration and peace. I have used the analogy of the ocean to refer to our faith. We spend a lot of time on the shore, wading, just getting our feet wet, dabbling and splashing about and we think we know the ocean and what it is all about. But unless we fully immerse ourselves in it we only experience as little bit of it. On the edge we cannot feel the buoyancy and we do not see the wonders of what lie on the ocean floor. Only when we fully immerse ourselves in the ocean can we know it better. And only when we immerse ourselves fully in our faith through prayer, study and allowing experiences of God to wash over us, can we be able to enter more deeply into the fold and know the assurances and peace and joy that comes from walking with Jesus.

Jesus is the one who can bring us closer to our creator. Why? Because Jesus is from God and knows God intimately, and shows us what God is like. There is no other faith expression that is capable of showing us what God is like. There are great teachers in other religions who have caught glimpses of God and share that with others, who point to great truths about the moral fiber of our being and produce great guidelines to live by. But Jesus is more than just a great teacher. Jesus is the greatest image of God we have, and he is the greatest example of what it means for us to live in that image also. And, because Jesus live in us and through us, we can know God so intimately that our actions, words and thoughts reflect that knowledge of God. But that means we need to immerse ourselves ever more deeply in our faith. Through our gatekeeper, Jesus, we can go all the way into the fold and explore and gain the sustenance we need to live life fully.

So once we enter the gate, what does that mean in terms of our living in this world? What good does it do us? When we have deep faith, there isn’t one difficulty we won’t be able to walk through. We will continue to have those difficulties but we will make it through them because our perspective on those difficulties will change as we include God in our handling them. God sustains us! God gives us insight! God comforts us when needed! But we need to allow God to inform us in our thinking and our decisions. When we are persistent in our belief that God is with us, we find courage to face what needs to be faced.

Jesus didn’t come to usher us through the gate so we wouldn’t have problems, struggles and difficulties. Jesus ushers us through the gate to give us what we need to continue our journey through life in spite of our difficulties. A deep faith will sustain us in our difficult times. A deep faith will provide us with what we need to see our way through anguish and pain. A deep faith will provide us wonderful moments of joy and peace and inspiration. A deep faith will help us experience the kingdom of God here on earth and lead us into that kingdom fully when we are released from our living in this physical world.

Many people will try to lead people to the ultimate experience of peace and happiness with promises of a better world, a different way than Jesus or God. But those promises are limited in their ability to offer us the deep hope that only Jesus can offer. If we truly want to know about God, Jesus is our best glimpse. If we truly want to experience the fullness of life and the fullness of eternal life, Jesus is our best guide, but it means following his voice through the gate that only he can open. Only then will we experience an “up north” kind of living, more relaxed, more refreshing with assurance and strength and love.