

July 26, 2015



“The God We Can Know: I Am the Door”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 10: 1-10

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and 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.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

Have you ever stood outside a beautiful door and wondered what was inside?

Jesus said: I am the door.

Have you ever stood outside the door of a friend’s house, maybe your grandparents’ house, filled with excitement for all the love and good times that waited inside?

Jesus said: I am the door.

Have you ever sat during a worship service and contemplated this stained glass window of Jesus at the door?

Jesus said: I am the door.

Have you ever stood outside a locked door knowing it would never open to let you in?

Jesus said: I am the door.

I’m beginning a four-part Summer Sermon series today on teachings of Jesus that begin with the words “I am...” I am the Door, he said. I am the Bread of Life. I am the Vine. I am the Light of the World.

I was inspired to pick up these themes by a book from my colleague at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Rev. Rob Fuquay, called “The God We Can Know: Exploring the ‘I Am’ Sayings of Jesus.” The God We Can Know. And as I thought and prayed about where we are, questions you are asking, challenges we are facing, I sensed a longing for the God we can know, and trust. The God with whom we long to have a close relationship. The God that is real and central to our lives. The God that is, for us, love.

So we’ll spend a few weeks looking at who God is and what God is like, and how God became incarnate in Christ Jesus that we might more fully know God, and how Jesus drew on his understanding of God and very familiar things—door, bread, vine, light—to help us draw closer to that living God.

Now the source of all this is in the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible. God is preparing Moses to become the leader of the Israelite people. Through the use of Hollywood-worthy theatrics, as we might say, God appears to Moses in the burning bush. As I heard a preacher say last week, “if you saw a bush in the desert burst into flames, you’d run the other way, wouldn’t you?”, just like those poor people caught up on Highway I-15 a couple weeks ago when the fire jumped the road and engulfed their cars. Run!

But instead, God calls to Moses from out of the bush: “come closer, Moses. Here I am.” And then God lays it all out to him—I have seen the suffering of my people, and I am sending you, Moses, to Pharaoh, to secure their release and lead them to the Promised Land.

Now personally, I don’t blame Moses for wanting a bit more from God before agreeing to take this on. So Moses says: “when I go to them, God, they’re going to ask—who sent you? Who put you in charge? What do I tell them? What name do I say sent me?”

God says: “I Am who I Am.” Frankly, that’s one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture. The Hebrew is far more rich and nuanced than the English translation can capture because there are no set verb tenses. So this name of God can be translated in a variety of intriguing ways: I am who I am. I am who I was. I am who I will be. I will be who I was. I was who I will be.

God IS. Past, present, future. Then, now, forever and always. God is I Am. From the widest oceans to the farthest stars. From the daybreak of morn to the sunset and night. From the heights to the depths. As close as a whisper. As far as the frozen plains of Pluto. From the universe to every atom in our bodies. God is I Am. The air we breathe. The ground on which we stand. The pillow that cradles our head in rest. God is I Am.

This understanding of God, this experience of God, this deep, radical trust in God, confidence in God, is the God Jesus knew. I Am Who I Am. Now incarnate, now made flesh, in Christ Jesus, that we might see and hear and know and trust and believe. This is the God we can know through Christ Jesus. As John Wesley was heard to say with his dying breath: “The best of all—God is with us.”

Now if all this “I Am” stuff seems a bit too strange or mysterious, Jesus helps us out by making it quite accessible to everyone. Jesus taught by telling stories, by drawing on examples and objects from ordinary daily life—door, bread, vine, light. He usually adds a bit of a twist, or a new insight, but he starts out solidly in the familiar. Taking the I Am name for himself, in today’s passage we hear Jesus say: I Am the Door of the sheep. I am the door: by me if any enter in, they shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.”

To get the full picture here, and in case you don’t know a lot about sheep-herding in first century Palestine, let me offer a few details. Sheep grazed widely during the day, but at night were herded together in a communal walled enclosure to keep them safe from thieves and other predators. If there was no gate or door to the enclosure, the shepherd lay down across the opening, putting himself in harm’s way to protect his flock. He guarded their coming out and their going in. He became the door, that they might be saved through the night and go out in the morning to find nurture in the pastures.

Do you hear Psalm 121 echoing in your heart: “the Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”

Jesus said: I Am the Door.

You see, you can understand the door in the beautiful literal way. You can also hear its poetic and spiritual meanings, adding layers upon layers of insight as you live into it. You can take it in all kinds of directions. Think for a moment, about the actual doors of this sanctuary, for example. Isn't it great that we live in a climate where the doors can be open, wide open, most Sunday mornings? People walking by, those coming to worship and those walking their dog or walking to the beach, they all see these beautiful doors flung wide open. And whether they come or not they receive the message that God's house is open to all and all may enter in.

Jesus said: I Am the Door.

Some of you may remember our former Los Angeles District Superintendent, the Rev. Dr. Robert Smith. African-American, powerful preaching voice. Very proper—always wore a clerical collar. At one point in his ministry he was appointed to a dying church in New York City. It was one of those big old brick fortress style churches you see on the East Coast. After several years serving there, he came back to California. I'll never forget the year he preached at Annual Conference about the revitalization of that congregation. How, when he first arrived, he walked all around that big brick building and every single door was closed and locked up tight. I think we all almost fell off our seats in the Chapel when he thundered out: "I gathered the Board of Trustees and I said to them: Open the doors! Open the damn doors! Open all the doors!" And then he went on to tell the story of that church coming alive, opening its doors to the people of its community and their needs, the children, the seniors, the families, the singles, creating programs and ministries and growing in worship and in mission. Open the doors!

People hunger to find God, to know God. Jesus said: I am the door. Open the doors.

Let the children come to me, Jesus said, to do not hinder them. Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. Come! I am the door.

Jesus the Door opens the door of our hearts to a love that heals and makes whole again. Jesus the Door opens the doors of our sanctuary and classrooms to all who seek learning and friendship and meaning and purpose and joy. Jesus the Door opens the door of Simkins Hall to the 50+ kids who will eagerly show up tomorrow morning to experience God the G-force through Vacation Bible School. Jesus the Door opens the door of our imagination to amazing possibilities of what God's love can do when it flows through us in service to others near and far. Now, whenever we do come through that door and into the presence of God, that threshold also invites us to leave some things outside. Think of it as if you are spiritually entering a Japanese house where you are asked to take off your shoes before coming in. OK, we're asked to leave our lattes outside and our cell connectivity outside. But think of it as leaving some other things outside, too. Put down any feelings of unworthiness and shame, for the grace of God is here for all. Coming into the presence of God, leave some things outside—less than worthy thoughts about others--stereotypes, prejudices, pet peeves, petty quarrels. Jesus said: I am the door. Come, come. Unburden your hearts. Make space for God to enter in.

Sometimes, because of all the encumbrances we carry, the heavy load on our backs, in our hearts, the old tapes, the lingering hurts, the harbored anger and resentments, we carry such a load that we can barely squeeze through the door. Yet to us, especially to us, Jesus says: Come. I Am the Door. God longs to be in relationship with you. God wants you to know God's love for you. Come to the one who has called you out of darkness and into marvelous light. Come, the Lord God, the great I Am, said through the prophet Isaiah: "everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price....Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant...Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near..."

Jesus said: I am the Door.

Open the doors—every kind of door. All the doors. Open the doors, that you may enter in to the love and joy God has prepared for you. Enter the door and find the God we can know.

Jesus said: I am the Door:

So, let us

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving
and the courts with praise!

Give thanks to God! Bless God's name!

For God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever
and God's faithfulness to all generation.

(Psalm 100:4-5)

Thanks be to God.

Notes: Based on Rob Fuquay [The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus](#).
Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2014.