

Bishop Gerhard Preibisch

Jesus calls his own by name – and when they hear his voice – they follow him.

In the Bible, people are often referred to as sheep. Some people today don't particularly like to be referred to as sheep because they think that sheep are among the dumbest animals on earth.

Actually sheep are beautiful and useful animals. They are created by God and are quite intelligent. Unlike cattle they can be led rather than herded. They also have a highly developed sense of voice recognition.

When I grew up in Medicine Hat, Alberta, my stepfather had a flock of sheep. I would watch with amazement as he would go outside and call the sheep. Although they were grazing and scattered all over the field, at the sound of his voice they would immediately come to him. Sometimes I would go out to the field and try to call the sheep. Although I would try my best to imitate my stepfather's voice, they wouldn't even look up from their grazing.

A tourist in the Middle East reported watching several shepherds all bringing their flocks of sheep to a water hole at the same time. To his astonishment, after the sheep had drunk their fill, at the call of their shepherd, each sheep would return to the flock to which it belonged. The sheep responded and followed their shepherd because they knew his voice. They had learned to trust him because a good shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

Every night the tourist would see him do that literally. As dusk fell, a shepherd would lead his sheep to a safe place — either a cave or a walled enclosure where the sheep could be safely sheltered for the night.

The shepherd then would lay down across the opening with his staff in his hand. The shepherd literally was the gate for the sheepfold. With his staff he would control who would enter or leave. He was ever watchful to keep the sheep from leaving and predators from entering.

This imagery helps us to understand what Jesus means when he says,

*“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”* (John 10:9)

We are not sheep. We are, however, the people of God, called and claimed by the One who has laid down his life for us — Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

What a wonderful assurance this is — that Jesus, who suffered and died for us and all people, is also the gate to the kingdom of God. What a relief it is to know that I am not the gate which keeps people in or out of the kingdom of God.

I give thanks to God that this role has been assigned to Jesus. Our role is simply to follow Jesus.

We follow him because we trust him. We follow with deep humility, knowing that none of us has a right to be in the sheepfold. We follow because — already in baptism — we heard God calling us: **“a beloved child of God.”** We follow because we believe the promise that nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. We follow because we continue to hear the voice of Jesus who alone can make God — and God's will — known to us. We follow because in Jesus we see as much of God as we ever hope to see in this life.

What Jesus said and did in his lifetime is our window into the heart of God. Looking into that window we give thanks to God that we and all people are welcomed into the full life of the church.

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