



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Jesus said, I am the gate for the sheep. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the mouth of New York Harbor stands the Statue of Liberty. As you may know, engraved at the base, you can find a famous poem. It was written by Emma Lazarus, and it's called The New Colossus. Like some of you, I had to memorize it in school. Parts of it may be familiar.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

I first saw the plaque where these words are written with my own eyes right before 9/11. I was in New York in August for a friend's wedding. Some friends and I took the ferry over to the island to see the statue the day before. The words of Lazarus were first written to support the campaign to raise money for the statue's pedestal. The statue itself was a gift from the people of France in celebration of the 18th century revolutions that founded our two nations. Lady Liberty is a kind of goddess, but in the spirit of the enlightenment, she is a goddess of reason. I suppose that runs the risk of idolatry, but I see her as what Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, who helped articulate the church's witness against the Third Reich, called a secular parable of the truth. Lady Liberty is a secular parable of the truth. And recently I have thought about that poem a great deal.

For six years, you see, I led a weekly bible study every Tuesday at a local coffee shop, and right across from my usual parking space, there was this consignment shop named the Golden Door. Now, I can't be sure that the name of the shop was an allusion to the new Colossus, but I always took it that way. Of course, there are more profound reasons that the poem has been on my mind. For the past six years, I had been serving in the Diocese of Texas. Toward the beginning of my time there in July of 2019, all the bishops of the six different diocese of the Episcopal church in that state, including my own bishops, issued a joint pastoral letter on our obligations to immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers to the strangers in our midst.

As one might expect, given the authors and the audience, it was a careful and balanced statement that acknowledged the legitimate diversity of opinion about public policy. But unlike many of those statements, it actually said something. Our bishops taught with clarity and passion unanimously that once people are here, regardless of their status under the law, we have an obligation, a Christian obligation to treat them humanely. In particular, our bishops insisted that separating children from their families or forcing human beings to live in squalid, overcrowded, and unsafe conditions was unacceptable and morally wrong.

Throughout our time in Texas, the bishop's letter provided much needed guidance for me. Our governor was lining the Rio Grande with razor wire, harassing churches and institutions that ministered to migrants, and busing newly arrived asylum seekers to other states. In his Easter sermon this year, you may recall, Father Bill shared the story of an amazing lay leader here in the Diocese of Michigan named Jennine Spencer-Gilbert. Jennine organized parishioners at the Church of Messiah to meet the needs of some of these very people who ended up in the church's neighborhood on the near east side of Detroit. These new neighbors were 150 asylum seekers from Venezuela, and they had been bused from Houston to Detroit by way of Chicago.

The New Colossus, the poem, seeks to express bold new hopes for the new world. For unlike many monuments in the old world, the Statue of Liberty is meant to celebrate a greatness that is founded neither on shared ethnic identity nor the violence of empire. Rather, our republic is founded on a written constitution, representative government, and inalienable human rights, chief among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As our history has shown, however, often these words have marked our aspirations rather than our actual behavior. At our best, we have sought to embody freedoms undreamt of in human history. But at the same time, we are the home of human slavery and the lynching tree, of the Middle Passage, and the Trail of Tears. Truly, it takes an ongoing struggle so that all God's children, all God's children, can breathe free.

"I lift my lamp beside the golden door," thus says Lady Liberty, the mother of exiles. And then she goes on to say, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Liberty stands watch on our coast near a port of entry that many of our ancestors used to come here, and as long as she still stands, she issues her clarion call: liberty and justice for all.

In today's gospel, we hear about another gateway to freedom. Jesus is at once the gate for the sheep and their shepherd. Elsewhere, especially the Book of Revelation, He is called the Lamb that was slain. He is the gate, He is the shepherd. He is the lamb. Holy scripture isn't afraid to mix its metaphors. This much is certain. Jesus is both our gateway to real and lasting freedom, and He is the one who leads us there. He is our shepherd, and unlike the others who came before and many others since, Jesus is neither a wolf nor a thief, nor a bandit. As Christians, we acknowledge no Lord but Him. We have no other king. Body and soul, in life and in death we belong to Jesus.

Unlike Lady Liberty, a constructed image that embodies our highest ideals, Jesus is a real living person. He is God's own Son. He is here with us this morning. Look around you. Can you see Him? God sent Jesus to set us free. God sent Him into the world to gather us into a single body. God brings us together from every tribe, every language, every family, every nation. In the second and third centuries, images of the Good Shepherd were everywhere. The Good Shepherd was in fact the single most common way that Christian artists pictured Jesus.

The cross hadn't yet come into its own as a symbol. The trauma of the crucifixion was still too fresh in our minds, and so ordinarily in their frescoes and mosaics, artists would portray a young and beardless Jesus. Sometimes with a little lamb hoisted over His shoulders. It is an image of protection and love that draws on the biblical images of David. It is especially common in baptistry, and it's no accident in baptism by the grace and power of the Spirit, God claims us with a love that can never be taken away. God unites us with Jesus, the living Lord. Free of charge, God gives us a gift that nothing can ever take away from us. We give up the tired old ways of this world. We renounce the fallen powers that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. We turn to Jesus, we turn to Jesus and accept Him as our savior. We promise to follow Him in the new and better way of love. That's what it means to claim Him as our only Lord and King.

Throughout the Bible, the image of the shepherd is a symbol of kingship. In the 23rd Psalm, for example, the psalmist confesses that the Lord is the one true King. What kind of king is that? God is the one who leads us beside still waters. God sets a table for us in the presence of our enemies. God joins us here and leads us in love. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us and God leads us in love. God is the one who fights off the thieves and the bandits and the

wolves. God is the one who leads us safely home. That's the God we love. That's the God who is our shepherd, the God who will never let us down.

Listen to what the prophet Ezekiel says when he condemns unjust rulers in a time of national disaster. He uses the image of a shepherd. "Thus says the Lord God: ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak," he continues. "You have not healed the sick. You have not bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strayed. You have not sought the lost. But with force and harshness, you have ruled them."

The fourth Sunday of Easter is celebrated every year as Good Shepherd Sunday. How we long for a shepherd like that. The collect of the day makes it clear. In this year's readings, however, we don't hear that much about the shepherd. He's mentioned, but today's lesson is focused on Jesus as the gate or the door for the sheep. So what about that? At times in scripture, the gate is described as narrow. That is to emphasize the urgency of repentance and the demands of discipleship. And so we hear the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Enter through the narrow gate for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction."

But that, thank God, is not the only thing we find about the gate or the door. Elsewhere in scripture, the door is described as wide open, as wide open as the arms of Jesus to welcome us home. And so for example, in the letter to the Hebrews, we hear about a new and living way, a new and living way that Jesus has opened up once and for all, for all of us through His flesh. Or again, in the book of Revelation, the living Lord Jesus says the following: "Behold," He says, "I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut." By His life, death and resurrection, Jesus consummates all the world's history as a history of grace and love. He reclaims our history and our story for the God of grace and love. He flings wide the gates of paradise so that all God's children can come home.

Again and again, despite our resistance and acting out, God takes the initiative. God loves us first before we are able to love. Sometimes by the gift of the Spirit, we respond faithfully to God's call. All too often though, we reject that call, but God never gives up on us. God loves us to the end. However, often we try to slam the door, God persists in loving us until finally in these last days, God sends us Jesus to seal a promise that can't be broken. Jesus triumphs over sin and the power of death. He triumphs over anything that oppresses us or holds us down. He is God's final word. God's yes and amen to the whole human race. And every last one of us, He has opened a door that can't be shut no matter how hard we try.

"The Open Door" - The Fourth Sunday of Easter 4/26/26
AudioClerk Transcription

And so no matter how far we wander, no matter who tries to keep us out, the door stays open because Jesus Himself has opened it. And He is our gateway into freedom. "Come to me," He says, "All ye that travail and are heavy laden." Come to me, whoever you are, wherever you come from, come to me. Come to me however you are hurting. Come to me all you who are tired or struggling or poor. Come to me, all you that long to breathe free.

Amen.