
Safety First!

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Ashley Carr
The Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year A**

I am clumsy. I've been accident prone for my entire life from the time I rolled off the couch as a baby to the stubbed toe from last night. So, everyone was a little nervous when I announced as a child, that I thought I ought to try roller blading. My family was nervous, but also I was quite nervous because of the aforementioned clumsiness. Obviously, it would be fun, but more importantly I wanted to learn so that people would think I was cool. Eventually, we went to Wal Mart and got the roller blades. Along with them, the safety gear. I had the usual stuff, knee pads, elbow pads, wrist guards, a helmet. So, we got home and I was all decked out, but I was still scared. Wouldn't get off the grass, and my mother has the most brilliant idea, when roller blading, she declared, I had to wear all the safety gear, but I also had to wear a life jacket. Nervous as I was, I said, "great idea!" Remember that I chose this activity in hopes of being cool among my peers. Well, off I went, in the life jacket and all the other gear, fearless! And it wasn't long before I ran into a friend who, rightfully, asked what on earth I was wearing. I said gleefully, "safety gear!" She said gleefully, "you're a dork!"

Then, and still today, I believe that safety, dorky as it may be, is a crucial part of our living in to our dreams.

Think about it, if you were to spend time walking around your house, what would you see? Beautiful furniture, art, entertainment, heirlooms and pictures. You'd see clothes, books, and if you have children, toys everywhere and remnants of snack hour in every nook and cranny. But you would also see around your home abundant safety mechanisms all over the place. Locks on the doors, outlet protectors, helmets, and Ring cameras, gardening gloves, EpiPens, and that expired fire extinguisher under the kitchen sink. Whether you're accident prone and generally fearful, or seemingly invincible and somewhat loosey goosey, our lives are padded with safety measures for ourselves and the ones we love.

Why? Not because it's cool, I learned that the hard way, but because safety gives us the freedom to live fully without being weighed down by fear and anxiety of the next possible bad thing. We keep safe the ones we love and with safety comes peace and with peace comes freedom.

That's what Jesus was getting at in our gospel text this morning. If you didn't understand it, don't worry, John is careful to note that the people Jesus was talking to didn't get what he was saying either.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses all these "I am" statements to help people understand what on earth he is and how we're supposed to be with him. You know them well, I am the light, I am the bread, I am the life. Today, he says "I am the gate" but before that, in the confusing part, he indirectly calls himself a shepherd. What we hear today cuts off one verse before Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." So, every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate Jesus as the good shepherd. Shepherd is my very favorite name for Jesus. I really hope that's not as dorky as safety gear because it also is my son's name.

Think about shepherds. A shepherd, if he's any good at his job, knows his sheep. He knows the one who limps because of the time she got stuck in the briar thicket. He knows the one who loves to bound through the pasture all by himself leaving the rest behind, the one who veers to the right danger be damned. He knows what the sheep like to eat and where they get their water. The shepherd surveys the land and leads the flock through the lush fields far from the rocky cliffside. The shepherd knows the dangers that haunt the sheep on the outside and in their heads and he keeps them guarded from those threats. The shepherd cannot eliminate the danger, but he can shield the sheep and pad them with comfort and safety measures to ward off the scary creatures of the night so that the sheep are free to be sheep. Together, the shepherd and the sheep are out

braving the wilds of creation, and there they become bonded, one flock. The sheep are utterly dependent on their shepherd who cares for them because sure, it's his job, but also because he loves them. He must love them to go to such lengths to keep them safe.

That is who Jesus says he is.

A shepherd to each of us limping, bounding, and wandering sheep.

Jesus knows our names. He knows our hearts. He knows the impulses that will drive us to danger, and he knows exactly how to bring us back into the safety of his care. Jesus has such a sense of us that if we're willing, if we're willing to be shepherded by him, oh my goodness, then what comes is abundant life. That's what Jesus says he came to do did you hear it? He says, "I came that they {us} might have life, and have it abundantly."

Because of Jesus our shepherd, we can have abundant life.

What does it mean to have abundant life? It means to be loved, seen, known and protected so that we can be safely led into the freedom of God's abundant will for us. Abundant life is a life that's overflowing with the stuff God has for us whether we like it or not.

When we feel safe in our bodies, we can challenge our abilities. When we feel safe in our homes, we can relax and slough off the stress of the world, when we feel safe in the loving care of Jesus as our shepherd, we can begin to live knowing that we are loved, without fear, without hesitation, and fully into the incredible sheep that God made us to be.

Jesus wants to lead us into abundance, a place that is overflowing with all that God has done in, a place where our cups pour over.

Jesus says he's the shepherd and that he's the gate. The gate is not an entrance into some exclusive club where only a few belong and others have to look in on it from the outside. Not at all. The gate is the entrance into a place of abundant life safe within the watchful care of the shepherd. Jesus is our safety and thus Jesus is our freedom and he's right here calling each of us by name and offering to lead us and care for us.

Alas, as cute as we are, we are not literal sheep, and the challenges of our lives are a bit more complex than eat, sleep, graze, and avoid the wolves. Maybe. Even still, being shepherded as a child of God in a dangerous world takes vigilance. It takes a willingness to open our eyes and look around to notice our fears, to notice where we want to go, and where you ought to go because that's where you're really being led. It's not a passive job to be led by a shepherd.

I'd venture to say that we mostly already know the choices and the direction in which our shepherd would lead us, but I don't know about you, this sheep prefers to do whatever she wants whenever she wants to do it. There's little freedom in that. There is great fear in venturing out beyond the protective will of God because there we find solitude, trouble, and limitations. Staying in the flock, being shepherded, that is where abundance dwells. Jesus came to shepherd us. To be the gate through which we find freedom. He came so that we might live abundantly. Not in stuff or status, but in God's abundant will for us, each unique individual sheep.

The safety gear we stock our homes and our tiny roller bladders with is a privilege. The safety afforded to us in Jesus as shepherd is for absolutely everyone. Every single sheep no matter what. Our shepherd knows us and still wants to be our shepherd. So go and live safe, free, and abundantly in the care of a shepherd who loves his sheep.