

FENCED IN

Today, three passages will be referenced. Two use the common Biblical analogy of sheep and shepherd, and the Acts text grants us a view of life in The Shepherds care.

Everybody is intimately familiar with Psalm 23—the Shepherd’s Psalm.

We use it when we need assurance, to be comforted or encouraged.

Those occasions are times when we feel trapped / when we need to escape from undesirable circumstances / when we are in bondage.... when we need to be free to be cared for as a loving shepherd cares for sheep.

In John 10, Jesus presents how to get out and be with the shepherd / how to have unimpeded access with.....God.

Jesus states that God is the shepherd who leads us out / who calls us out to be cared for, and.... the way out of the pen is through the gate.

The gate is Jesus. Jesus provides the way / the means to connect with God – to live the Abundant Life.

God calls us to live the abundant life.... and Jesus shows us the way / opens the path for us.

Abundant life: living with a sense of bounty / of a cup overflowing / in abundance..... truly seems rare... these days.

Most of us are more inclined to feel the walls of deprivation closing in on us. We are constantly reminded of shortages, of time running out, of it’s only going to get worse, not better.

We only have a limited amount of money, and expenses keep going up faster than income. Gasoline is pushing a \$1.40/litre. Food prices are going up, as is most everything else.

Demand is much higher than supply, therefore costs increase because that is how free-market capitalism works. Value is based on rarity = on deprivation. We don’t exist in a world of God’s economy when is one of bounty, but instead we live in a culture of deficit and greed.

Moreover, there is too much to do each day, too much demand, and time is running out.

We don’t have enough time, so time because a currency in our system of want and shortages.

It is much like being trapped in an addiction: the next fix is never enough.

The weather yesterday was wonderful, and the mosquitoes haven’t been informed yet,..... so don’t tell them.

I started the day, sitting on a rock drinking a cup of coffee. I soon began to notice the countless things that I have to do around the place. Then someone calls and said if I come now, he has some wood I can have.

Suddenly, my calm morning has run out, as I consider chores that I don’t have time to do because I have to work.

Before I knew it, I was trapped in the deficit mind set,.... *which was interesting because I was working on a sermon that proclaimed a different way.*

Fortunately, the passages opened my eyes a bit just as Katherine asked if I would set up the badminton net. I did,..... and suddenly there was time to enjoy the day and play a little badminton.

I think most of us are conditioned to focus on what we don't have, what we can't do or what we are missing. And, existing in that enclosure of thought is Not abundant living.

The early church had their fears and needs, too, but living with THE gate freshly opened, they discovered something new and wonderful.

They engaged in community living.

The early believers fellowshiped and ate many meals together.

I bet Potluck meals were big back then, too.

They also nurtured each other, and shared their possessions and money so that all would be equal.

Leadership was chosen, and not based on wealth or power.

In community they felt safe to risk,.... to be Bold,... and to be open to God's bounty.

*Subsequently, they experienced many wonders and signs from God.

Alas, pride and prejudice crept in. Before long, some were hoarding and not giving away their bounty.

Fear and anger became an issue. Possessions had to be safe guarded. Walls were built and fences erected,..... and THE GATE became merely an icon.

Jesus the gate became the centre of worship, as patriots adore a flag.

They forgot the purpose of a gate, and much of Christianity acted like caged animals, instead of a community with God.

Fences separate. Fences form a secure place to protect and to isolate, and they can become like a fortress or a prison.

Our fences can be financial security and independence or... whatever else gives us the illusion of safety and protection.... FROM Others and from Depravity.

Yes, we need fences. Any farmer knows that, yet all enclosures need a working gate.... or they become a trap / a tomb.

The gate is not a symbol or an icon, but rather a means of egress or entrance.

Jesus compared himself to a gate because his teaching and his way of living allowing free flowing and open connection to God.

Being and living as Jesus presented is walking through the gate and being with God.

AND, there is more to this analogy, and it is being in the flock / being in community.

To be sure, God relates to us as individuals, even calls us by name, but, and let us never gloss over the reality, that God is part of the whole.

God is in creation, as we are, and God relates and engages us in community—the whole. God relating to people collectively / in community is a priority in the Bible.

Yes, we are accountable for our actions and choices, yet our salvation is also interwoven with our relationship to God and each other – our community.

I realize that I frequently mention the importance of relationships and being in community, and I do that because it is a dominant theme in the Bible,..... and because we need to be reminded of our collective relationship with God.

We need to be reminded because our culture constantly tells us to think and act as individuals. We are weaker as individuals, and therefore easier prey to be corralled. There is pressure to break up cooperatives, collective purchasing and unions. We are encouraged to be independent—to pull ourselves up by our own boot traps, and we are told that if we have enough individual “power” and “money” we can get free / we can escape our fenced in prison.

And, that message of escape from our enclosure comes from what Jesus called thieves and bandits—in other words, it’s malicious deception.

The way and teachings of Jesus is the gate,... and.... we are NOT alone. We –WE are in relationship with God.... together!

With God,.... as a group of believers / as church in community we are free to live abundantly. We are stronger together, and therefore fear is reduced, and that enables us to bold / to risk..... and to be open to God’s amazing surprises.

I’m sure we know all this. We know that it is easier for a group of people to stand up to a bully. We know we can do more when we combine our resources and work together. We know that to be true. Yet, we struggle with doing community. We need to enhance doing community

Some, not all, attributes, behaviours and practices of doing healthy community includes: fellowship, sharing and giving, nurturing each other, trust (which invites giving and receiving counsel), purpose and direction,..... and growth.

A glance at these—some more than others:

Fellowship means authentic times together—good and bad experiences, yet as the early church learned,... we must be intentional about planning opportunities for good fellowship. And, I think we do that pretty well. We play together, laugh... and eat together. Do know that shared meals are powerful. Eating together breaks down barriers and invites intimacy. *A wise person knows that a first date must include eating together. It works.*

Nurturing and enabling each other is part of a healthy community because it invites balance. Nurturing and enabling keeps us on equal terms so a few powerful persons can not take control, and thus break the community bond. A good community works for the common good as each are lifted up. We work and live together.

The next category is a struggle for us: sharing and giving, and it is not just a problem for us. Controlled donations are the trend these days, and that is unfortunate.

Dan Dyck, of MC Canada, recently wrote in the Canadian Mennonite, about the decline in donations to general organizations, such as MC Canada. MC Canada... as well as most churches are facing budgetary challenges because of declining contributions.

Dan noted that overall donations are not dropping, but rather people controlling the outcome of their money with designated donations.

He mentioned that there are 85,000 charities in Canada, and most have a good “tug on the heart” plea for money.

It seems we’d rather feed the cute baby cubs than feed the old momma bear,..... even though a healthy mother could then feed the cubs,...even better.

To expand on this further, we have lost an appreciation for wellness care to our community, and more often than not,... we have forgotten what a gift really is.

Our boring conferences and church budget is about nurturing the community that enables ministries, that plans for life giving fellowships, that forms quality leadership and empowerment to all and that invites and teaches our children to discover God and Jesus.

Without strong, healthy churches and conferences, MCC and other fine organizations will no longer be blessed by able, empowered leaders and volunteers.

Charities will rise and fall to what ever fire they aim to extinguish.

Also, I think most of our donations are Not gifts, but rather investments.

A gift is released, no strings attached. It is given away.

An investment expects an outcome and a return.

Anymore, much of our donations come with strings. We want to control what our money does, and usually we want to feel good about the results too.

Our donations are purchasing “good feelings”, and feeling good is pretty expensive.

Instead of freely releasing our money to the community / the church... trusting that group (each other) to use it as God leads,.... we are more inclined to designate / control / invest our money.

I think it is a pity that we have to do fund-raisers, but we do... and they are necessary..... because we are NOT feeding the mother bear enough food to properly carry out the work of God.

In God’s abundant economy, why can’t we have a huge budget line that merely states: for whatever opportunity that God brings to us?

That concept surely would be trusting the community / the church..... and it would demand real Giving.

Money is a touchy subject, and I’ve likely said too much,... because we live in a world when no one has enough and everything is too expensive.

Trust is another important aspect in a vibrant community. It is a risk to trust, and there will be disappointments. Yet, if we, as the Bible teaches, risk trusting in each other with the rest of the group covering our backs, then we’ll be okay.

An isolated disappointment can be overcome with the support and involvement of others, and the community can all work for healing... which invites more trust.

Moreover, love is a key ingredient for trust, and I think we know the source of love. God is by our side, too,... and invites us to believe in each other, as God believes in us.

Finally, a healthy church community has purpose and grows.

The analogy shows that God calls the sheep out through the gate, each by name and all together.

I believe we are here for a purpose—God’s purpose for us.

And, that purpose includes developing a strong community of believers, and our purpose is also to bring healing, peace and hope to the world.

Relationships and a church community are too complicated to simply state and limit what our tasks are.

The youth learning about the First Nations narrative and making a banner is our purpose, as is writing minutes of a meeting, as is visiting someone in the hospital, as is a good laugh together, as is a handkerchief to catch a tear,..... ALL done / EVERYTHING done as followers of Christ / sheep led by God.

And, let us never be hesitant to call back to God when God calls us out.

May we always name why we do what we do / why we are here / why we Give money to the church / why we spend our time and gifts in the church.....

We do community with God / We serve God / we give to each other / we give to the whole / we risk / we minister..... BECAUSE we are No longer fenced in.

By the love and grace of God,... we have a gate, and God has called us ... ALL of us together... to live the abundant life... with God and each other.

We are NOT alone, nor are we fenced in. Shortages and high prices may stress us, but we will be okay. We are not overwhelmed.

We are resurrected people. We live in a world of overcoming darkness and depravity, we are not chained or enslaved fear and isolation.

We are not alone.

We walk through the gate together, ... as God leads us out to greener pastures.

Our cups are overflowing..... surely, goodness and mercy will be with us always..... because I’ve got your back and you’ve got mine,... and God is having a good laugh as we try to figure out who’s got who’s back....because life is Not about self preservation. Life is about being in a loving relationship together.

Today is a good day,..... listen for God and receive the blessing of being part of wholeness.

Amen.