

"Trying to Jump the Fence"
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John 10-10, Psalm 23

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CALL TO WORSHIP

Though we are faced daily with struggles and anxiety, Jesus came that we might have life abundant; life that is richly lived today and filled with the promise of something more.

Come, people of God, in gladness, gather in peace, dwell in beauty, praise with joy, listen with anticipation, and trust in glory.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

23rd Psalm NKJV

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever. Amen.

THE WORD

John 10:1-10

Common English Bible

Jesus said, "I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice.

They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice." Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying.

So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them.

I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture.

The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

PRAYER: Lord, open us to all that you would have us be for you and for others. Breakthrough into our lives and our church with new possibilities. Amen

Reading from Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, 'Counting Sheep' is a mental exercise used in some cultures as a means of lulling oneself to sleep. In most depictions of the activity, the practitioner envisions an endless series of identical white sheep jumping over a fence, while counting them as they do so. The idea, presumably, is to induce boredom while occupying the mind with something simple, repetitive, and rhythmic, all of which are known to help humans sleep.

According to an experiment conducted by researchers at Oxford University, counting sheep as they jump over the fence is actually an inferior means of inducing sleep. Subjects who instead imagined "a beach or a waterfall" were forced to expend more mental energy, and fell asleep faster than those asked to simply count sheep.

I would concur with Oxford University, but with a little different reasoning: After reading John 10:1, where Jesus says that anyone who does not use enter by the gate, but climbs in another way is a thief or a bandit; the thought of counting thieves and bandits as they try to go over the fence, would not help me get to sleep or sleep very well!

In fact, sometimes if you only read a verse or two of the scriptures, you may well be left sleepless. Even so, if you read to the end of this passage, Jesus shares with us that he is the gate and we can be saved through him, coming and going, and find good pasture. How you find your rest is only one of the many decisions we make each day.

If we think of ourselves traveling across the meadows of life and we reach a fence, we are much like the sheep, trying to jump over or go through rather than looking for a gate.. If you are offended by being compared to a sheep, think how Jesus must sometimes feel 'Leading Smelly Sheep', But that is a different sermon for another day...

Picture the fences before you as your decision times. As you approach, you begin to process: what is the best way to get to the other side of that fence? Of course the sheep would want to be on the other side of the fence.

Everyone knows 'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' and because we have many decisions to make and only one lifetime of unknown quantity of time to make them, it is good to do some processing before you reach some of the fences.

With a fence, there is the over way, the through way, or the gate. There are several problems with going over or through:

1. What if you get to the top of the fence and waver in your decision. You then become a fence sitter, hung up in time and space, unable to move either way.
2. What if you trip over the top board and land on your face on the other side? Bruised when you arrive.
3. What if you try to squeeze through, between the boards and get stuck, again hung up in time and space, unable to move either way.

I have watched cows try the over and through options, to end up badly cut and scratched by boards, nails or barbed wire. Good thing we have a more intricate decision making capacity than the animals do. Yet like the animals, we look first for an 'easy button' to get us in.

In the movie "3:10 to Yuma" when the notorious outlaw Ben Wade is captured in the small town of Bisbee, an impoverished rancher, Daniel Evans, offers to assist in escorting the cold-blooded killer to the city of Contention for \$200. Wade tries to bribe Evans with one thousand dollars to let him escape.

Wade tells Evans that he just likes to do things 'easy' and he lists for Evans, enticements of what he could do with the \$1000: Pay your debts, buy 100 more cows, build a new barn, hire a couple of

ranch hands. His boys could go to school – “grow up smart., and what about Alice, she could be the proud wife of a Bona fide Arizona Rancher. All you have to do is say ‘Yes’... Nobody needs to know.”

Ben Wade, has gotten by, trying to go over and through the fence before. Obviously things haven’t worked out so well for him and now he is testing a new spot on the fence, but he never even looks for the gate. Though he says he likes to do things ‘easy’ – he either doesn’t believe the gate can be opened for him or he thinks that it is too easy and a trick...

But Daniel Evans is looking beyond the fence and searching for the gate to get in. He knows he would live the rest of his life with the final decision in his heart and mind, and he has too much conscious for that to be the kind of ‘easy’ that Wade presents. Evans would forfeit the peace and pleasure of life on the other side of the fence because he settled on an over or through the fence decision.

Conversely, in the movie “Molokai”

To deal with the leprosy problem in the Hawaiian Islands in 1872, sufferers were relentlessly exiled to Molokai, a barren island off the coast. There they lived in miserable surroundings, abandoned by the outside world. To alleviate their fate, Father Damien was the first priest to go to Molokai.

Before Father Damien leaves to minister to the lepers, he is told by his superior “You are not to touch any patients; and eat nothing that you have not prepared yourself.” Again before he boards the boat he is told: “Now remember, don’t touch anyone.”

The first boy on the island that Father Damien meets asks him, “Father, could I be your altar boy? In my village, before I came here, I was one.” Father Damien as he approaches the boy, sees the sore on his face and replies “Ya, that would be a wonderful help.” The boy, about 12 years old, knowing why he has to live on this island quickly adds, “I wouldn’t have to touch the chalice or anything.” He then turns to leave.

Knowing also why the boy is on the island, Father Damien says, “Wait, let’s agree formally” and he reaches out his hand to the boy. As the boy hesitates, Father Damien nods his head ‘yes.’ The boy slowly lifts his hand, where two fingers are missing and bandaged. Each with a smile, they shake on the agreement.

Little by little, Damien earned the trust of the lepers on the island, and eventually, his appeals for nuns and supplies resonated throughout the world. In his decision making, the easier ways: the top of the fence and a way over was pointed out to Father Damien, a way through was pounded into him, but he chose the gate. He risked it all to find the gate. When he got into the greener pastures, he found the importance of relationship within the task before him as his risks paid off.

The easy way isn’t always the most obvious, the safest looking, or the one that society would encourage us to take. Both of these movie examples were set in a time many years gone by, but some of our decisions today are as difficult or maybe even more difficult as the fences set before these others.

What if this is the story of Heaven, with Jesus at the gate? There are lots of jokes about heaven’s gate...but the scripture does not say he is holding anyone out, it says he will save those who use the gate.

In John 14, Jesus said *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*

And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas [the doubter] said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

This scripture, along with the 23rd Psalm, we use often at end of life to sooth the dying and grieving, but it is meant for all of us as a map to the gate. What if this is the story of Heaven on earth? You can have the better life, if you choose the truly easy way', rather than trying to climb over and through the decisions before you. The gate is the better way to the greener grass.

Life is easier if we don't carry the burdens of past poor decisions with us. Of course, it is best to make a good decision in the first place, but God can and will make something out of even our worst decisions, and by the gate we are forgiven and can forget the mistakes of our pasts. Thank you, Jesus!

Thank you God! for Easter: happening over and over, so we can experience heaven both here on earth and in the green pastures beyond this life.

Most of us get to the gate, through others: family, church, teachers, co-workers, friends or someone who cares enough to show us the way. The office supply company - Staples, has used 'the easy button' in their commercials to show a clutter free simplified 'greener pasture' type work office.

In one of the commercials, a gentleman with a sport coat and tie, walks into his shared office, unable to find his 'easy button' in the clutter. He is sharing the office with two others: a woman who offers for him the use of her 'easy button' to help him find his lost 'easy button.' He replies "Use your easy button to find my easy button?"

At the next desk, Steve suggests "Won't that, like, tear a hole in the universe?" The woman replies "What is the worst that could happen?" The button is pushed and the whole office, cleared of the clutter, looks like an organized, peaceful and pleasant place to work. As they look around they find the missing 'easy button', but seem to be missing Steve. A small cupboard opens and you see where Steve has been put, along with the clutter.

The point is that we can share the easy way to the gate. 'What is the worst that could happen?' It is easier when we help each other find the gate. On our building it says "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors." (Or that could be open gates...) With all of our decisions, we need to stay pointed in the best direction and keep our 'eye on the prize.'

There will be some fences ahead... The better rest may come by counting sheep as they continue to go after God's promise by locating the gate, meeting Christ and then going through the gate, for the gatekeeper has a peaceful, pleasant pasture of rest on the other side.