

Tantalizingly clouded by the mists of Appalachian folklore, the elusive legend of the sin-eater surfaces from time to time, now a-days, mostly in the form of entertainment, such as in novels or movies, and in the reminiscing of grandparents or great-grandparents who still remember the black cloaked man who would appear at burials to consume a meal of bread and wine representing not salvation, as when we share the Sacrament of Holy Communion, but the sins of a dead person. After ritually consuming a person's unforgiven sins, the sin eater was said to whisper a few magic words pronouncing the dead person's soul free to enter Heaven, then would leave as quietly and mysteriously as they had arrived. While the ritual was said to be the gateway for the dead person's entry into Heaven, the sin-eater was condemned to live a desolately lonely and shunned life, as consuming sins made them unfit to be part of society.

Believed to have originated in medieval England, Wales, and Scotland, and carried to Appalachia by immigrants, the last rumored visits of sin-eaters are said to be in the 1950's. Very little information can be found on the historical origins of sin-eaters, making their legends all the more mysterious. However, the legend of the sin-eater shows there are times when there was a perceived need for a person to face the reality of human sin, so that one human could enter heaven, at the cost of another's damnation. This is not a unique need, and those who study humanity and all our foibles are most likely familiar with the custom of scapegoats: a person or animal that would somehow represent the misdeeds of another, be they an individual, family, or community and suffer and die so that others could be cleared of any wrong-doing. All to provide a sort of gateway to better life, one wiped clean of guilt and accountability.

Such legends might help us understand Jesus' words in John's Gospel, which we just heard, where Jesus referred to himself, not as the Good Shepherd, as we might be expecting this Good Shepherd Sunday, but as the gate. This might be a confusing metaphor, especially for those of us who are unfamiliar with farming, shepherding, or the raising of animals like sheep. Even more so if we aren't familiar with the practices of shepherding back in Jesus' day.

Many scholars and commentators are eager to help us gain clearer insight to things like sheep folds, gates, sheep and shepherds in ancient Palestine. Several scholars point out that sheep folds were made of high solid walls of stone, with a single opening for a door. At night, the shepherd would sleep in front of the door, like

a gate, so no sheep could get out without his knowing, and likewise, no other animal or person could enter without his knowing. This makes for a lovely metaphor of Jesus as protector, someone who has the best interest of his flock at heart, and those who sneak into the sheep fold do so not out of love and concern for the sheep, but out of a greedy desire to steal some sheep for themselves or simply to cause harm.

This is a nice metaphor, to be sure, and serves as a good warning. It cautions those of us who follow Jesus to listen carefully for his voice, to compare what we hear from the many voices competing for our attention to the Jesus we know in the scriptures and judge if they are of God or not. There is nothing wrong with that. But this is John's Gospel, which is a rich, deep Gospel, and sometimes we can miss a deeper message the author may be trying to get across to us.

The deeper message might have to do with Jesus calling himself the gate. And it might not be just any gate Jesus was referring to, but a particular gate. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus healed someone who was lying by the pool near the Sheep Gate in the temple. The Sheep Gate was a specific gate, it had a singular purpose. That was the gate the temple shepherds led their sheep to when it was time for the Passover. Remember part of the celebration of the Passover was the sacrifice of lambs, one per family, if the family could afford it. That gate was where the shepherd, even good ones, and the sheep parted ways, the shepherd to his work, the sheep to sacrificial slaughter.

Perhaps when the author of John's Gospel has Jesus refer to himself as the gate, the author is suggesting Jesus is more than a shepherd who watches over, protects, and cares for the sheep until delivery time. Jesus takes the place of the gate, through which his sheep enter into pastures of abundant life, not because Jesus ate or took on sins of others, but because Jesus showed the love and forgiveness of God in his life, his death, and his resurrection.

Too often I fear we mistake the word "abundant" to mean lots, or plenty; lots of food, lots of clothing, plenty of gas in the tank, or plenty of work to do. But I'm not sure that is what the author of John's Gospel meant by "life in abundance". Because the lives of those in the early church were not lives of affluence, wealth, or independence. There was persecution, families who rejected their members who believed and followed Jesus, and other hardships. Jesus' promise of abundance doesn't mean a life free from suffering injustices, as the other readings we heard this morning indicated. Which means we need to be skeptical of voices who tell us something different. God's blessings and Jesus' resurrection do not translate into luxury, especially if that luxury comes at a cost to someone else, but the life where God is with us, in the midst of this life, as Psalm 23 so beautifully promises, even when we are in the shadow of death. This Presence is what can transform even the

worst moment into a holy one, that doesn't mean it takes away any pain but reminds us God is with us in our pain, and inspires the type of sharing that we heard about in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, where equality isn't something where one person loses so that another person gains, but is where all people are recognized and have what they need.

This is a radical notion, and can be terrifying in a world that has believed for so long that strength is violence, greed is good, fear is power, and scapegoating works. That is why those voices Jesus talked about in today's Gospel haven't gone away, and why customs like sin-eaters manifest from time to time. Because it is hard for so many to believe a Love like God really does exist, cares about us, even after some of the terrible things any person might think or do or believe. And those voices Jesus mentioned, the ones that have no problem using people to get what they want, can sometimes sound very practical, very convincing, and even very attracting. Sometimes they can promise to save us, or protect us, at a cost. But those voices, promises, and cost are nothing new or surprising, I'm sure we've heard them all before, and they only continue the same old tired cycles of violence, oppression, pain, injustice, and scarcity.

Jesus' odd and surprising reference to himself as the gate in today's Gospel is another way of saying his resurrection is the beginning of a different way of living, one that doesn't ignore the other voices, but lives among them without fear. Whether that looks like what we heard in the reading from Act of the Apostles, where we live generously, or wither it looks like what we heard in the First letter from Peter, where suffering for following Jesus is put in perspective, those of us who follow Jesus can find ways in our everyday lives, to express and show God's Presence and God's desire that no one be punished for the sins of others, but where all are free to love God and each other. While it could be argued such a dream might never come true, Jesus' resurrection can give us the courage to strive to realize that dream, even in the nightmare life can be, as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is fond of saying, because through Jesus' resurrection, that gateway is open to us all; and all of us, no matter who we are, can by what we do and say live the resurrection hope every day.