One of the most loved images we have of our Lord is that of the Good Shepherd, holding in his arms a tiny lamb. Captured in more stained glass windows than we could count, this portrait of Jesus simply cannot be erased or replaced. For most, if not all of us, our Lord Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. In every way we can imagine that is important, our Good Shepherd is our life.

Of the four gospels, the John’s is endearing to us because in it, we see these eloquent, lovely pictures of our Lord painted with words found only in His Gospel. In John, Jesus is not only the Good Shepherd, but he is also the Bread of Life, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Light of Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Bread of Life, the Water of Life, and the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
In today’s Gospel, our Lord gives color and texture to another image that gets lost in our love of the Good Shepherd. Here, our Lord says of himself, “I am the Gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” What does this mean for us today? If I were preaching in another parish in the tony west End, the word gate would refer to a gated community. The connotations are of exclusivity, protection, and keeping the riff raff out. But for us here in Powhatan, we understand gates, and the shock of seeing a wandering cow on rte 60 when the gate is not closed! How could this picture of our Lord as a gate become more central to our understanding of the faith and our relationship to him as our risen Lord? His words, not mine, give us clues to answering our questions.

The image of our Lord as the Gate to the sheepfold first suggests **exclusive access**. Comparing others to thieves and robbers, Jesus says that only he has the right to grant access to the sheep. In the text, in
what seems at first like a mixing of metaphors, our Lord says, “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

The One who is the Gate is revealed as the Good Shepherd. This mixing or blending of images tells us that only Jesus Christ -- who is both Gate and Good Shepherd -- has the right, authority, and power to grant what he calls “abundant life.” Counterfeit shepherds and flimsy gates swing here and there in the ever-changing winds of time. Only Jesus Christ, as **the Gate**, grants access to life that has the quality of abundance. This exclusive access found in our Lord who is both Gate and Good Shepherd carries with it the reminder that many are “thieves and robbers” who have no concern for safety, well-being, and life of the sheep. Bogus shepherds number in the thousands. Cheap gates can be bought anywhere, with their thin promises and empty hopes that prey off on the spiritually hungry and unsuspecting.
Not so with Jesus Christ! He alone can supply both the security of the Gate and the presence of the Shepherd. He alone is the Gate of life in whom we find the forgiveness of sin and life in all its abundance.

What is God saying to us?

First, refuse to settle for anything less than Jesus Christ. I am often asked why the Christian faith matters to anyone anymore. We read that many congregations are half the size they were 20 years ago. More young adults are leaving the Church than babies are being born into the Church. As an institution, the Church has fallen on hard times in the last 10 years, infected with scandal and even worse, tainted with cynicism. Is it time to just close the doors, lock them, and throw away the key?

Without hesitation or reservation, I say “No!” Why? Because for all her problems and shortcomings, the Church is still the visible witness on earth to the living and loving Lord, without whom there is no hope, no future, no Good News. The Church is not a perfect destination, but the window on the One who is. One week, a parishioner approached me
to say “the Church is full of hypocrites. I responded, yes it is, and there’s always room for one more!” Why is it we settle for our failings instead of the fullness of Jesus Christ? In moments of despair, when life is at its worse, we of faith do well to embrace Jesus Christ and commit ourselves even more to him as our Gate of life. We would do well to look at our first communicants today. Last night, one little boy said: “Father, I’ve been waiting my whole life for this!” Their eyes are full of eagerness, their lives filled with hunger. Have we become numb to how special the gift is? They understand who the shepherd is, and who the gate is. Do we?

Second, learn the life-giving cadence found in following Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” Not only must we recognize Jesus Christ as the center of our faith, but we must follow him. In the following of him, we find our lives nourished and protected. Dietitians tell us that sugar may give us what they call a “sugar high,” meaning we may feel good temporarily when we eat sugar, but the long-term effects
of consuming sugar are not healthy. In faith, we may eat all kinds of sugary spiritual candy that cannot sustain our lives. All of us long to “feel good” and will often do anything to get there. Following Jesus Christ may involve doing the tough work of feeding the hungry and caring for those abandoned by society. It may not “feel good” all the time, but actually this is the very work to which our Lord calls us.

**Third, keep listening for his voice.** Jesus calls the sheep and the sheep know his voice. This One who is both Gate and Good Shepherd knows our name and never stops calling it. There come times when life’s difficulties shout more loudly than all the good gifts God promises to give. But even when life is shouting pain, know that Jesus Christ still calls your name.

**Finally, believe that life can be abundant, full, and meaningful.** Life coaches and professional coaches are now teaching their clients what Jesus Christ taught a long, long time ago. Simply put, we tend to become what we think we are and live the life we believe we want to
live. When Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” he was saying that to you and me. Put your name there and speak it to yourself: “Jesus said he came that Walter might have life and have it abundantly.” Believe that, dear ones. Believe he is the Gate of life that opens to life abundant now and always. Such is God’s good gift to you! Let us come to the altar where he continues to care for us.