

## Holy Portals April 30, 2023

One of the first books that I remember reading when I was a kid was *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak. I've been reading it to my daughter Coraline over the past couple weeks. *Where the Wild Things Are* is a wonderful picture book about a young boy Max, who is naughty to his dog and his mother, and he is sent to his room without dinner. As Max stands in his room sulking, he notices that trees begin to grow before his eyes, and soon his room is transformed into a forest!

Near the forest Max discovers the ocean, and he sails across the ocean to the land where the Wild Things are. He becomes King of the Wild Things, and has a wonderful time rumpusing around with them. But ultimately, he misses his family. He leaves the Wild Things, sails back home, and ends up in his own room. And the final page of the book is enough to melt your heart, but I won't tell you what happens - you have to read it for yourself.

Maurice Sendak. *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York: Harper Collins, 1963.

So that was a staple for me growing up. And then when I was a little older, I read *The Magic Treehouse* stories, by Mary Pope Osborne. That series tell of the adventures of a brother and sister, who, whenever they go into the treehouse in their backyard, travel through time. They visit dinosaurs and medieval knights, mummies and pirates.

And as I grew older, I watched movies like Disney's *Alice In Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*. I read stories like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; *Bridge to Terabithia*; *Harry Potter*; *A Wrinkle in Time*; *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

Do you know what all those stories have in common? There is some portal, some doorway, some transition from our everyday world into a magical realm.

To this day, one of the greatest disappointments in my life is that I still have not found a magical portal into a fantastic new land. I look in every wardrobe I find. Every train station I visit, I casually lean on each barrier to see if they're solid. I stand by windows during tornadoes in hopes of landing in Oz. And if I'm walking in the woods (this is true), and I see two trees that are standing close together and there's a branch across the gap so it forms a doorway, I always walk through.

Nothing yet, but I'm still hopeful. One day.

That's a little bit of an introduction to our readings today. Today is "Good Shepherd Sunday," a kind of unofficial celebration that takes place every year in the church. Each spring, we always hear some story of Jesus being a shepherd. On this day, we always say Psalm 23, which begins, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

Today in our Gospel story, Jesus starts off on a promising note. He begins his lesson (to the Pharisees) by talking about sheep and the shepherd and how the sheep know the voice of the shepherd. He warns against false shepherds – thieves and bandits.

And then, when his listeners don't get it, Jesus says plainly, "I am the..." Wait a second. He says, "I am the gate for the sheep"??? Where's the good shepherd line? That's what I want! That's what Jesus is supposed to say, on Good Shepherd Sunday!

"I am the gate" is so much less satisfying. We didn't name our school here "The Gate Learning Center!" It sounds like a penitentiary with big wrought-iron gates out front. "I am the gate for the sheep." Disappointing.

And yet, the more I sit with the image, I have to admit, the more I like it. Sure, the Good Shepherd is a rich metaphor. We have stained glass windows to depict it, a lovely image of Jesus as caretaker and protector, as unconditionally supporting us, whether we are in green pastures or walking through a dark valley. Jesus is with us.

But the image of a gate has endless possibilities. "Whoever enters by me will be saved," Jesus says, "and will come in and go out and find pasture." Will find life abundant. And I like that Jesus isn't just telling us to come in to the safe pen. Jesus is also the gate by which we go out into the rich pasture, into a new world, a good world, where there is enough for everyone.

"I am the gate," or more accurately in the Greek, "I am the doorway" or "the portal;" or it could even be translated "the opportunity."

I am the wardrobe. I am Platform 9¾. I am the rabbit hole.

If we choose to follow Jesus, what possibilities are available? Could the world be a Narnia, where the good and just prevail? Could the world be a land of Oz, where people grow to be smarter and more loving and more courageous?

If Jesus is the doorway, could we enter into a world like the one described in Acts? A society where people share what they have, distribute to those in need, spend time together, break bread with one another, have glad and generous hearts, praise God, surrounded by goodwill?

That's the kind of world I'd like to walk through a doorway to see. "I am the portal."

There is a Japanese religion called Shintoism that speaks to this idea. One of the hallmarks of the Shinto faith, one of the most unique features are doorways called torii. Torii are very simple gates made up of two vertical posts and a horizontal crossbeam on top. They can be made out of simple wood or carved from ornate stone or metal.

The purpose of these torii, these gates, is to mark a transition from the normal, the everyday, the mundane... to the sacred, the holy. Torii can be found at sites where (it's believed) spirits or divine beings dwell. When you enter a gate, you are reminded that you are on holy ground.

"I am the gate." Jesus reminds us to look for the divine in the midst of the mundane, to discover the godly in our everyday lives.

You don't have to be Shinto for the imagery to translate. Since medieval times, crossing the threshold of a church was considered a sacred act. It was entering a sanctuary, a place where pursuers could not follow, where those in trouble could find rest and help. Hopefully, the simple act of entering a church puts you in a different frame of mind or heart. This is a sacred space.

In most churches, there is an entryway, a vestibule, which we call the "narthex" in the Episcopal church. This is a kind of transitional space, which provides an opportunity to set aside the worries and concerns of everyday life and enter into a sacred moment.

Remember what Jesus says. "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in AND go out and find pasture. Jesus is a two-way gate. Just as we are invited into a sacred space, we are also called to go out and bring that abundance to our neighbors in the world.

There's also this phrase, "Whoever enters by me will be saved." Some folks interpret that as a one-time occurrence: "If you believe in Jesus, you will go to heaven." In our faith tradition, we see it more as a journey. It takes a lifetime of going in and out of that gate. It takes a lifetime of trying to follow Jesus, of coming in to worship and going out into the world to be a true disciple. That is the life of a baptized Christian.

[Today, we celebrate three young people who are starting that journey. Baptism is the beginning of following Jesus, of learning who the man was and what he taught, of following him as our Messiah. We are excited to welcome Josiah, Raelynn, and Quinne to this journey.]

So I'll take it. Jesus' metaphor today is no Good Shepherd; I don't think we'll see any stained glass windows of a gate anytime soon. But I have to confess that I do like the image today.

I'll close with a poem by my favorite, Mary Oliver.

### **Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does it End?**

There are things you can't reach. But  
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,  
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing  
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.  
Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around  
as though with your arms open.

Oliver, Mary. "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?" From *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*. New York: Penguin, 2017, 186.

Amen.