

January 27, 2019
Which Road Will I Choose?
John 10:1-10

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth ...*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Choices. Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," is about choices. And once you make the choice, life unfolds, and you find yourself unable to go back. Jesus challenges us we have choices, too: "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*" (Matthew 7:13-14).

1. The Narrow Way and Wide Way

Two weeks ago, we were introduced to the story of Jesus giving sight to a blind man (John 9). It's a story of choices. There is a man who was born blind (for convenience we'll call him *Ishmareh*, Hebrew for "a person who sees"). Jesus offers him the choice between darkness and light (no one forced him to wash in the Pool of Siloam). Ishmareh chooses light. We (who see) can say he chose the infinitely better path ... but for him it is a tremendous step of faith. He chooses to leave behind the past, the security, the comfortable rut he's always known (albeit begging by the roadside). That is a tough choice – a narrow way choice. His life will turn upside down.

The no-longer-blind man, Ishmareh, is brought before the Jewish leaders ... they offer him a choice: to deny what has happened and turn on Jesus or stand with Jesus. This is a choice to either stay in the synagogue or be excommunicated (John 9:22). He chooses Jesus. This is a tough choice, a narrow way choice, with no going back.

Like Ishmareh, we may find ourselves in comfortable ruts – we know life isn't the greatest, but the familiar rut we're in seems "safer" than change. Our equivalent to begging by the roadside is comfortable. Will we change? If we do, we may look back and wonder how in the world we ever enjoyed being blind. But change is difficult.

Like Ishmareh, we may face choices to stand up for Jesus – and potentially pay a price. Ask our high school students. Ask our college/university students. Ask the next person beside you in the pew. Ishmareh's experience is when we do so, God honours that stand. He stands with us and is with us. But standing up for Jesus is difficult.

This story is also about choices for the Pharisees. They are confronted by a man born blind who can now see. They could choose awe, wonder, and worship: God is alive and working in their world. It would stretch their worldview to imagine God can burst into their world with power. Or they could choose to scoff and turn away. That's the safe choice. And that's the choice they make.

The Pharisees were very "religious," but they are faced with a choice of what genuine spirituality is like. Jesus heals Ishmarih on the Sabbath ... contrary to what the Pharisees felt was acceptable. They had to choose: is this miracle the act of God (though it stretched their concept of true religion), or is this the act of a heretic (God cannot do this sort of thing)? They choose the easy road. They choose not to change. It is much easier to define religion by rules than freedom.

Like the Pharisees, we have to wrestle with who God is and what God is doing. What if Jesus doesn't fit our way of understanding who He should be? What if God is alive and active in our world? What if "God moments" are happening all the time? Can I accept that? Do I see God's hand in my life or do I just explain it away?

What if God is doing things that shake up our neat theology? What if He doesn't care if He heals on the Sabbath, what Bible translation we use, or what worship songs we prefer? What if He really is calling us to welcome strangers? What if He really is calling us to reconciliation? What if He is serious about us living holy, Christ-like lives?

2. I am the Gate for the Sheep

In John 10:1-10, Jesus continues his discussion with the Pharisees, the religious leaders. He tells the same parable (or story) twice, because they don't "get it" the first time (10:6). He shows them, in stark contrast, the choices they are making about God, spirituality, and the important things in life.

Some background: a sheep fold was a small field enclosed by a wall. It had one opening through which sheep could come and go, but no door. At night the shepherd himself lay across the opening: no sheep could get in or out AND no predator could get in or out. The shepherd was literally the door. You could go in by the door – or climb the wall, like a thief – and sneak in.

Who are the sheep? Us! People who long to know and need to know Jesus.

Who are the robbers/thieves? The Jewish teachers who didn't want anything to do with Jesus. They talked a lot ***about*** God. But God was only someone they talked about. They had rules and regulations, but their religion was as lifeless as the tax code.

When a teacher makes religion all about believing the right doctrinal things ***about*** God, but you don't really ***know*** God, it's empty and cold. Jesus says that teacher is like someone who tries to enter a sheepfold by climbing over the wall (John 10:1, 8). These "robbers" don't care about the sheep; they care about the rules. They care about

“correctness.” The effect of legalistic religion tied to the right teachers and, right rules is slavery to a system, stolen joy, and spiritual death. These teachers – full of rules, critical of others, encouraging division, fueling unrest – rob us of the joy, passion, and full life (John 10:10) of knowing God through prayer, study, and friendships with others.

Jesus wants us to have a “full” life. *“I have come,”* says Jesus, *“that you may have life, and have it to the full.”* An old Jewish description of a full life is being able *“to go out and come in.”* If you can say you can *“go out and come in,”* it means your life is secure and safe. You are as comfortable outside the walls of your home as within them. Your life is content and peaceful.

Ishmareh discovered that through Jesus, and through Jesus alone, he really could get to know God. He could “go out and come in” through Jesus. His life is safe and secure. He is not overwhelmed by worry and fear. He had met God in Jesus. His life is full.

By getting to know God, through Jesus, we can go out and come in as well. In hands of God, who *“preserves our going out and our coming in”* (Psalm 121:8), we have full lives. Scripture says, He is the *“new and living way”* to God (Hebrews 10:20); *“through Him we have access to the Father”* (Ephesians 2:18). Before Jesus, we could think of God as, at best, a stranger; at worst, an enemy. But Jesus shows us what God is like; He opens the gates of heaven; He gives us the Holy Spirit – God’s presence real in our lives. It’s not about rules; it’s all about relationship. How does that relationship happen?

3. Real Relationship: Opening the Door

A common image used for knowing God is going into God’s presence through Jesus, the door/way/gate (*“I am the gate”* [John 10:7], *“I am the way ...”* [John 14:6]), OR opening the door of your life to Jesus, (*“I stand at the door and knock ...”* [Revelation 3:20]). Think about the metaphor a bit:

Someone knocks on my door. Sometimes it’s a friend. I invite that friend in – of course. Inevitably we have a wonderful time. We get to know one another better. Life is full.

Sometimes it’s not a friend – it’s someone trying to sell me something (perhaps even a political party, perhaps even a religion). Most often I don’t invite that person in. We may have a polite conversation on the porch. But after a couple of moments I encourage the person to move on. No friendship. No relationship. No fullness.

Some of us are comfortable enough to talk to Jesus on the front porch. We’ll talk about doctrinal things – what we believe **about** God. We’ll talk about how we think the world (or the church) would be a better place if everyone would do things the way we “know” is right. After a few moments we close the door and encourage Jesus to move on. He never gets in the door. Inside our homes – our lives – nothing changes.

What if you invite Jesus into your home, into your life? He will see dirt – things in your life today and your past that need cleaning up. He will see shelves cluttered with junk –

stuff that needs to be thrown out; stuff that's half finished. He will see things that need repair – goals, priorities, relationships, habits, good intentions ... Jesus can handle it. Because He also sees the faith, love, the joy, and the possibilities, too. This is all part of having a relationship with Jesus.

A full life only comes about when we invite Jesus in to clean things up, to throw stuff out, to establish new priorities, to get us out of our comfortable rut. If we really are serious about Jesus, we have to let Him make changes.

Will we allow Jesus into the various "rooms" of our lives – our family? our recreation? our finances? our plans? our priorities? When we invite Jesus in, He may change things. It is a risk. It also takes effort. What renovation project doesn't? Can we trust the changes He will make will only be for the better – for best?

"I didn't go to religion to make me happy," said CS Lewis, "I always knew a bottle of port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly do not recommend Christianity."

Inviting Jesus to some into your life is not about being "comfortable." It is about allowing Him to swing a sledgehammer or two. You commit. Then, with help from the master carpenter, you see the project through, bit by bit, room by room, floor by floor. Plans alone are not enough. We need to take action. It takes time. It takes work. It can be frustrating. But you make real changes; stick to them; and keep on keeping on. Renovating a rundown, dilapidated house takes a lifetime of effort, but it's worth it.

- It is a risk to stand up for what is right and true, to stand for Jesus.
- It is a risk to make public your commitment to follow Jesus.
- It's at least as big a risk to let Him in – to allow Him to change you.

Anyone who tells you choosing to follow Jesus, choosing to go in by the gate, choosing the narrow way, is easy and safe is trying to sell you something. But it's worth it – just ask Ishmareh. Just ask many people here this morning.

Jesus stands at the door and knocks and knocks. You have a choice. You can leave him on the porch or invite Him in. There is a narrow way, walking with Jesus and allowing Him in to change your life, with all of its risks. It's life-giving and fulfilling. There is a broad way, walking on your own, staying in the same old rut you've always been in. It's life-draining and dead.

You have a choice. Two roads diverge before you. Which will you choose? If you take the one less traveled by, that will make all the difference.