

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2020
John 10:1-10

“The Abundant Life”

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, often called Good Shepherd Sunday, because that is the theme for worship that rises up from the Scripture readings, prayers, hymns, and sermon. Of all the images that we have of Jesus – Savior, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, just to name a few – the image of Jesus as our Good Shepherd is one of the most beloved, even today. And this is surprising since most of us have such a limited understanding and experience of who shepherds are and what they do. How many shepherds do you know (not including kids in the Christmas program who wear a bathrobe and towel on their heads)? Even in the densely populated area outside our nation’s capital where the only sheep to be found are in a petting zoo, we love Jesus as our Good Shepherd. And so we come to worship and praise our Risen Savior, our Good Shepherd, who tells us in today’s Gospel lesson: **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly”** (John 10:10). Jesus’ words become the basis for today’s sermon on this Good Shepherd Sunday under the theme, “The Abundant Life.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The abundant life is something that most of us dream about at one time or another. Most people think of the abundant life as having everything you need or want; not having any worries, concerns, or fears. You know, “Hakuna-matata,” from *The Lion King*: no worries for the rest of your life! It’s having the means to go where you want to go and do what you want to do. Right now, under continuing stay-at-home orders that abundant life might be as simple as just stopping to get a coffee on your way to work. When is the last time any of us did this? Or just taking the kids out to the playground. Or going to the store without wearing a facemask. Truth be told, maybe the abundant life is not just the big, shiny things, but the ordinary, everyday things that we take for granted. When all is said and done, maybe the abundant life is not about things at all, but relationships; how we are connected to one another. In a very real way, that is what this time of the coronavirus is teaching us: the value of one another. Life is one of the key words in John’s Gospel, used more than any other New Testament writer, and always refers to eternal life. Jesus, who is the door of the sheep (John 10:7, 9), has come to give his sheep, his flock, life that is full and abundant. Now what does that look like? Last week, we asked for input from you on social media to share what the abundant life looks like ([#AbundantLifeSJLC](#)). Thanks to everyone who responded. Feel free to share photos or images to express this. Thank you to Jennifer Hills for her able assistance with this fun project to help us grow in our understanding of the abundant life that we have in Jesus our Good Shepherd.

No matter where you are joining us for online worship today, each of us has entered through some type of door or opening to get here. Think door from your bedroom through the door of your kitchen into the door of your living room or family room. We pass through doors all the time and often don’t even give these a second thought. It is this entry point, this gate, this door, that Jesus says he is. Elsewhere in John’s Gospel, Jesus says something similar: **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (John 14:6). If we want to know who God the Father is, we first have to know Jesus. We get to the Father only through the Son, who is the gateway to the Father. Contrast this with those who try to sneak in or jump the fence. Those very actions demonstrate that such persons cannot be trusted. So how do we distinguish between shepherds and shysters; between being led and being misled; between being blessed and being bamboozled; between those who are prophets and those who would profit; between those who would pray with the flock and those who would prey upon it? Jesus tells us: **“But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his**

works have been carried out in God” (John 3:21). Godly motives are rooted in loving and serving, not deceit and exploitation. Our Good Shepherd has come that we may have life and have it abundantly.

Many years ago, a man named Eric Bishop wrote about traveling through Iran by donkey from the east to the west. This was in the days before travel by car or plane, and in that part of the world it was by donkey. He and his traveling companions stopped in a tiny village for the night. They woke up next morning to a snow-covered landscape, and the donkey driver stated that it was impossible to go further until the snow melted a bit. So they remained in the village that day. Eric Bishop writes about what he saw: “In the afternoon I set out to see the sights about the village. Not far away I came to a mound of earth piled up in a large circle, like a crude rampart, and on the top of the mound all around the circle was a heap of dry thorns. As I stood wondering what this might be one of the villagers approached me. ‘Salaam,’ I said, ‘please tell me what this enclosure is for.’ ‘Oh, that is for the sheep,’ he replied. ‘They are brought in here for the night for safety.’ ‘Good,’ I said, ‘but why have the dry thorns been piled on top of the wall?’ ‘That,’ he replied, ‘is a protection against wolves. If a wolf tries to break in and attack the sheep, he will knock against the thorns, and they will make a noise, and the shepherd will wake up, and drive off the wolf.’ ‘That is fine,’ I said, ‘but why does the wolf try to climb over the wall? Here is the entrance to the enclosure; it is open. There is no door to keep out the wolf; he could easily enter here.’ ‘Oh, no,’ said my guide, ‘you do not understand. That is where the shepherd sleeps, the shepherd is the door.’ And then I understood something that had often puzzled me. It became clear to me why Jesus had in John 10 called himself first the Door and then immediately the Shepherd. Since he is the Shepherd he is also the Door” (*An Easter Sourcebook – The Fifty Days*; Liturgy Training Publications, 1988, pp. 80-81; quoting *The Expository Times*, vol. 71, October 1959-September 1960, edited by A.W. Hastings and E. Hastings. Published by T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, Scotland).

The abundant life which Jesus brings is different than what the world promises. Jesus doesn’t promise that life will be easy or trouble-free. Jesus doesn’t promise that we will always have what we want. Jesus doesn’t promise that by following him we’ll always have sunshine and laughter. Right now, we are living through some very challenging times in the midst of the coronavirus. Where is Jesus in all of this? Right here among his people, as he always is. Like Psalm 23 tells us, even now Jesus is leading us beside still waters that restore our soul. Even now, Jesus is leading us in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. And even when we must pass through that narrow door and walk through the valley of the shadow of death, our Good Shepherd is there beside us. He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Death and the grave have no power over our Good Shepherd because he himself died and is now risen from the dead. Our Good Shepherd laid down his life on the cross for us, paying the price for our sin and disobedience, and he now lives and reigns to all eternity. Like we heard in today’s Epistle reading: **“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls”** (1 Peter 2:24-25). That’s how much our Good Shepherd loves his sheep, his flock. That’s how much the Good Shepherd loves you. The abundant life that Jesus wants to give each one of us begins now in this life, and will be brought to completion in the life to come where he will make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

Today, Good Shepherd Sunday, was to be Confirmation Sunday here in our congregation, and of course, that cannot happen as we had planned. This year, we have only one young person who was to be confirmed, and I say to that one Confirmand, your Good Shepherd loves you. God willing, we will have that Rite of Confirmation sometime in the fall, and celebrate with you and your family. Until then, hold fast to Jesus our Good Shepherd. The full and abundant life is found in him and his promises for you. Amen.