



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Abundant Life”

Part IV of the Summer Sermon Series, “Hidden Treasure.”

John 10:7-16

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A reading from the book of John, chapter 10, verses 7-16:

So Jesus spoke again, “I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That’s because he isn’t the shepherd; the sheep aren’t really his. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. He’s only a hired hand and the sheep don’t matter to him.

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that don’t belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.



A CNN story from June 26th reads, “Nearly 100 drivers followed a Google maps detour and ended up stuck in an empty field.” The article goes on to describe how a car crash on a road leading to the Denver International Airport prompted the drivers to take a detour. However, this detour, which would supposedly cut travel time in half, proved too good to be true. What ensued next resulted in 100 cars following a dirt road that turned into a muddy mess. Some cars couldn’t make it through the mud, and about 100 others were trapped behind them. One woman interviewed for the article said, “There were a bunch of other cars going down [the dirt road] too, so I said, ‘I guess it’s ok.’ It was not ok.” I found this article through another minister who posted it on Facebook. He wrote, “There’s got to be a lesson for the church in here somewhere, right?”

I think this story aligns perfectly with the text we find ourselves exploring today, the story where Jesus uses the analogy of a gate and a shepherd. We’ve immersed ourselves in the parables of Jesus this month, hearing stories about the kingdom of heaven being found by unlikely people in unlikely places. We’ve heard stories of buried treasure, a precious pearl, a net bursting with fish. We’ve found the kingdom of God in a tiny mustard seed and at a dinner party crowded with outcasts. Now we’ve arrived at a story that is not quite a parable, but an analogy for the kingdom of God chock full of all sorts of characters and images. The Episcopal priest and author Robert Farrar Capon says that parables teach us that the Bible “is not about someplace else called heaven, nor about somebody at a distance called God. Rather it is about *this place here*, in all its *thisness*, and placiness, and about the intimate and immediately Holy One who, *at no distance from us at all*, moves mysteriously to make creation true both to itself and to [God].”¹

Parables and, by proxy, this analogy in the book of John, point us to a faith that is incarnate. In this story, faith incarnate looks like dusty, sandal clad feet pacing back and forth along the field. This enfleshed and lived out faith feels like soft sheep’s wool and tastes like a cool drink of water after a hot day’s work in the fields. John 10 takes us to a place with thieves, outlaws, a shepherd, a hired hand, a wolf here and there, and lots of sheep. In today’s context, this shepherding imagery feels unfamiliar and outdated, but for Jesus’ followers, a story of a shepherd caring for his flock of sheep was a story people could get behind. This passage was relatable to them because it reflected actual circumstances they experienced. It was necessary to have an enclosure for the sheep with a front entrance that could be locked because the theft of sheep was a common occurrence. This thievery was devastating because sheep were a major source of food, clothing, and barter for other necessary goods. So for Jesus to say, “I *assure* you that *I* am the gate of the sheep,” in one breath, and “*I* am the good shepherd” in another breath, was a bold statement to make. Jesus claims to be both the gate that protects the sheep from potential thieves and intruders as well as the shepherd that leads and guides them.

Many biblical commentaries on shepherding imagery focus on the unintelligence of sheep. An article from the BBC claims that sheep are one of the most unfairly stereotyped animals on the

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 15, qtd in Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, And Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 161.



planet and that almost everything we believe about them is wrong. Apparently, sheep are not bumbling around banging their heads against their gate as many of us might believe. They are actually rather intelligent animals with impressive memory and recognition skills. Lutheran pastor Elisabeth Johnson concurs, “Whatever else one can say about the mental capacities of sheep, they have this in their favor: they recognize the voice of the one who cares for them. They follow their shepherd, but will not follow a stranger whose voice they do not know. What about us? Do we recognize the voice of the good shepherd over all the other voices promising abundance?”²

It’s pretty incredible that an animal that people have stereotyped as stupid and helpless has the ability to recognize his shepherd’s voice. I think the sheep have an advantage over us in that although we are supposedly much smarter as humans and not animals, we often succumb to the many voices vying for our attention.

Verse 10 is the cornerstone of this passage for it is when Jesus declares, “I came so that they could have life, indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.” The NRSV translates this promise of “life to the fullest” as “I came that they may have life, and have it *abundantly*.”

One of the many problems that is plaguing our culture right now is that we have confused an abundant life with a life of abundance. People are searching for meaning, and advertisers have tapped into that desperate need. Some commercials especially tug at your heartstrings, but by the end of the commercial, you’re not quite sure what product they are trying to sell you. An example that comes to mind is an Extra Gum commercial from almost five years ago. This commercial has over twenty-two million views on YouTube, so even now, its staying power is evident. In the commercial, a cover of “Can’t Help Falling in Love” plays in the background, while we see the relationship between an unnamed young man and woman unfold. The commercial has no dialogue and relies solely on the music playing in the background and the various interactions between the two young people. We see the young couple share their first kiss, spend extended time apart for the first time, and watch their relationship unfold. The common factor in this modern love story is how the unnamed young man always gives the young woman a stick of gum. If you look carefully, you can see that he saves each gum wrapper. At the end of the commercial, the young woman is led to a room filled with framed pictures. On closer examination, these pictures hold little sketches of the couple that the young man made on the back of the gum wrappers. The final sketch is a picture of the man on one knee. She turns around, and there he is—her high school love who has stuck around all of these years is now on one knee with a ring in his hand. As the commercial closes, the Extra logo flashes on the screen, and a narrator speaks for the first time, saying, “Give Extra, get extra.”

Although I’m sure this commercial helped Extra sell lots of gum, its success is in the sale of a feeling. This commercial sells young love, the feelings of adventure, hope, and possibility. It leaves you yearning for more. But we all know that a stick of Extra gum will not land you the love

² Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on John 10:1-10,” *Working Preacher*. Luther Seminary, May 7, 2017, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3244.



of your life, no matter how badly you may want it. We empty our wallets and fill our calendars, hoping that the products we buy and the experiences we consume will fill the aching in our hearts. Yet time and again we are left feeling empty. One commentary says that the difference between any old shepherd and Jesus as the Good Shepherd is that here the shepherd is willing to die for his sheep.

It is hard to keep track of all the characters in this story, and we would be here all morning if I tried to go through all of the possible meanings behind each of these characters. However, an image that is striking to me is that of the thieves. The Shepherd has spent careful time cultivating relationships with his sheep. He knows them by name, and they follow him because they trust him and know his voice. Yet the thief operates on a scarcity mindset. The thief believes that there aren't enough sheep to go around; that it would be best to snatch someone else's sheep instead of caring for and raising his own. The thief by definition is a life of scarcity. We rob ourselves of an abundant life when we live constantly looking over one shoulder, coveting what we don't have and always wanting more. The thief takes what is not his because he is hungry—but he is looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places. The thief can easily pile up material goods that could equate to abundance, but the thief is always starving for what he does not have, which is an abundant life.

Jesus is both the climax and the resolution to the greatest story ever told: where God's love for humanity is so great that the great I AM took on flesh and bones to become Love incarnate for *us*. In the book of Exodus, God says to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." Jesus tells us who he is through his life and actions. God's people spent generations searching in all the wrong places for things that would satisfy. But thanks be to God that Jesus came to provide the only sustenance that would truly satisfy. "I am the living water," Jesus tells the woman at the well. "I am the bread of life," Jesus tells the five thousand. "I am the light of the world," he tells his disciples. "I am the good shepherd," he tells us today.

I am who I say I am. The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, but there is someone better who has come. There is a shepherd who will take us to green pastures that will never fade, who, when our souls are so faint we feel that we can't go on, takes us by the hand and leads us to waters that will never run dry. He's the very bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, and I haven't seen a gum commercial that can promise that.

He doesn't stop there. The Good Shepherd knows that there are other sheep besides the ones in his sheep pen. He must lead them, too. We get that scarcity mindset again when we think that we're the only ones who have that coveted position in the sheepfold. Jesus welcomes all. Jesus desires for ALL to come to his fold, to eat of his pastures and drink from the well that will not run dry. The Good Shepherd came to do what no earthly leader could do. He gathers the sheep together, from north and south to east and west, so that all may become one flock under his caring hand.

Coming back to the CNN article about the GPS fail, I think the lesson for the church is this: there are many voices bombarding us, but only one Shepherd. When we listen to those other voices



that promise abundance, it's usually too good to be true. If we truly believe that Jesus is Lord, then we ought to start living like it. Biblical scholar Sarah Dylan Breuer challenges, "If Jesus is not Lord, then there are countless others who will try to take that position in your life: bosses, politicians, parents; acquisitions, ambitions, causes; always just one more favor to do, one more promotion to get, one more enemy to defeat, before you can rest secure."³ Jesus is the Author of Salvation and the Giver of Life, and I promise you he's true. You will never drink from cooler waters or lie in greener pastures. He does not offer the abundance that the world promises. He will not give you a shiny and pain-free life, but he will give you an abundant life. He promises to go before us and lead us in the way that only the true Shepherd can lead us. Will you follow him? Will you follow Jesus even though it's costly? Will you give up the life you've tried to build for yourself to gain a life that is abundant? Life to the fullest, indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Sarah Dylan Breuer, "Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A," *Dylan's Lectionary Blog*. April 12, 2005, https://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/04/fourth_sunday_o.html.

