

Sermon on John 10:1-10
Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today we hear the words from Jesus himself – why he came in the first place and for what purpose, in verse 10 of the passage from John: “*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” Here, Jesus is speaking about his sheep, the flock who follow him in trust and faith. That’s the Church. He is talking about you and me! He came to give YOU life, abundant life that begins now and lasts forever, through faith.

This is an audacious promise to make when for so many throughout the world, life does not feel “abundant” at all these days. What is abundant life in a global pandemic, during COVID-19? That’s the good news today that the gospel brings us from the mouth of Jesus our Lord! The promise of life, abundance when we see only scarcity, limitations and death! We are so used to speaking about all that we have lost in the past month – our freedom to be together – to even see our grandchildren, to live and work freely without fear, our limitations to stay at home, and the danger so many are in from the *coronavirus*, whether you are sick and being treated, or a health care provider, or an “essential worker” distributing food or other necessities. What is abundant life in a nursing home, or in prison?

In the worship planning book *Sundays and Seasons*, which was published last summer, they give ideas to worship leaders for things to do that will help you and me think about each Sunday’s gospel themes. Today they suggest that we each write things down about where we see “God’s abundant life” lived out among and around us – and then share them with each other. That seems pretty risky to do in the middle of a pandemic, when most of us are living with perceived scarcity and feeling pretty “grumpy” about life in general! But that’s EXACTLY the time to look harder for God’s promised abundant life! So we’re gonna do it!

Please go to your chat bar and write down one thing that you see people doing, or what you witness about the abundant life you have been given by God! Think about it – then do it! Is it the first flower coming up in your garden outside, or the beautiful, sunny weekend we are having in springtime, Minnesota! Is it the laughing grandchild you can watch on Zoom? Is it a kind message you have received from a friend or loved one? I would like to see that chat bar full of examples of God’s abundant life that you and I are experiencing today, despite having to stay at home during this pandemic! That should give you something to do while I return to the text, and tell you more about what Jesus is up to here!

So let’s turn to the image of sheep and shepherds in scripture on this Good Shepherd Sunday. The passage from John chapter 10 is one of my favorite

passages in John. Jesus makes use of the image of sheep, because it would be a common, familiar image in the life of his audience in ancient Palestine. From the story in Luke about Jesus' birth, stories and images of shepherds abound in the gospels. And we just sang the hymn based on the 23rd Psalm that sing of the "Lord as my shepherd", who gives us everything we need! We love this image of the good shepherd who leads the sheep to pools of cool water, safe to drink, to green pastures for grazing, and right pathways that are safe! This is how we like to look at our leaders, our pastors, and medical care givers.

But then Jesus talks about sheep stealers...false prophets...the danger is real! Thieves and bandits were common dangers to sheep and their shepherds. Who are those bandits these days? Was Jesus referring to dishonest leaders who care not for their flocks? Today there are scammers who prey on fearful, vulnerable people in times of crisis, jacking up prices for medical supplies. There are politicians and cable news hosts who misconstrue the truth and say you don't have to be afraid of getting sick if you are young – that old people are going to die anyway....so that you can go to work and get back to your old life because the ECONOMY is more important than staying safe – portraying a false choice between saving lives from the coronavirus or saving the economy. Everything we do should only be done if we can take sufficient safety precautions, because so many people are at risk. There are even pastors who are saying that God will protect you from getting sick so that you should come to church and worship – and then some of them get sick themselves from COVID-19. There's a lot being said out there that isn't true, that we shouldn't trust, and dare not follow! Why? Because they don't care about you, they just want your money or your vote, because they are more interested in wealth or power than your life. A lot of injustice and inequities are being exposed these days by the coronavirus crisis, that were hidden before because of our prosperity and general good health.

In contrast to this, you can trust in what Jesus says, because HE CARES for the sheep. He cares for you! He healed many, and gave his life for you, and me, and the whole world, that we might have life, and have it abundantly! We also have those human examples of shepherds who care for their sheep in the health care providers, nurses, doctors, human beings who care for people who are sick or risk their lives to prevent us from protracting the virus. Like the first responders who run towards a fire, flood, danger or violence in order to keep us safe and protect others from harm. Jesus was not a shepherd in real life – he was a carpenter, then a teacher of God's kingdom and a prophet – but he acted like a shepherd in caring for the sheep, in giving his life for them, for all of us. The key point to this passage is that we follow the shepherd who cares, and don't listen to the thieves and bandits who don't care! Jesus has proven that he cares, and so we can trust his voice without fear. With so many voices out there, we listen to him!

Today we have a sign of life in the midst of a pandemic, hope in the midst of fear. God is receiving another child into the Body of Christ, a sheep into Jesus' flock. Elizabeth "Lizzie" Bohlinger is being baptized today into the body of the Church – a baptism which we postponed on March 15 because we went into Safe at Home physical separation. Now, we have been learning how to use technology to help us gather as the Church. We also know that any person of faith can baptize – you don't need me or any other person! A mother, a father, a grandparent or other Christian adult can baptize, because it is God's Word of promise along with the water that makes a baptism! You and I, Lizzie and any other child of God has already received the promise of mercy and forgiveness, but the water and the word of God in baptism is the speaking out loud of God's promise of abundant life, now and forever, as a part of the family of faith. Lizzie's parents, Jon and Anna, will say these words and wash her with water, and we will all hear the promise as the Church, witnesses to God's goodness! Seeing and hearing the words and action of her baptism are a sign of God's abundant life today for all of us!

In many Christian traditions, a child's home is the customary location of a baptism. I know this is the tradition in Sweden; my relatives's children were baptized at home, even when the older generation may have been baptized in church. Our late-ELCA Bishop Herbert Chilstrom was baptized at home in rural Litchfield, Minnesota. This was before the age of Zoom, so only the pastor and family were present! But now we hear the words and witness the action by the miracle of technology! It's an amazing thing, a "watershed" for churches to ponder in a pandemic, to keep the whole flock safe while we receive another new lamb into the fold, into Jesus's loving arms! We'll see what the Biblical scholars and church theologians have to say about this in journals – but the academics may have to go online or on "Facebook" to find out about this! So there you are!

In the end we have the promise in baptism of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Abundant life, as Jesus promised, free from fear – even during fearful times. But the life lived with faith in God's love continues throughout, whether it's a war, a famine, recession or pandemic. Jesus is still present with us. God is here, and we hear once again the promise of God's love repeated. So be patient, have faith, be of good courage, because we belong to Christ, who is faithful!

The hymn of the day is a lovely song of faith in times of fear, written to go with this image from the gospel. *"Have no fear, little flock, for the Father has chosen to give you the kingdom...Have good cheer, little flock, for the Father will keep you in his love forever....Praise the Lord high above, for he stoops down to heal you, uplift and restore you. So thankful hearts, raise to God!"*

So let's sing it! And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.