

April 26, 2026
John 10:1-10

Easter 4
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Shepherd of Abundance”

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

During my childhood, it was not uncommon for my friends and I to have dinner in each other’s homes. It might have been a day when we were playing at one person’s house and a parent asked if we wanted to stay for dinner, or the invitation might have arisen from the friend who wanted to continue our time together. After the obligatory phone calls home to our own parents to make certain that this was all right, we would gather to enjoy a meal either as a guest or as the host of a neighbourhood friend. When we were a guest, these invitations always came with strict instructions from my parents; this included be on your best behavior, always say “please” and “thank you,” eat whatever food the family is serving, and always offer to help clear the table after supper. While some of the food in my friends’ homes was unfamiliar, my memories of being a guest at another family’s table are all very positive.

Among the most memorable of these dinner invitations was at my friend Dave’s house. Dave was one of my closest friends during my school days (I was able to reconnect with him at last year’s high school reunion), and we would frequently spend time together in school and at each other’s homes. When I was a guest at his family’s dinner table, I got to experience the wonders of Italian cooking; Dave’s mother was a fabulous cook who always put on a feast every time I was at their home. She would also encourage us to eat more, since she thought we were all so skinny (something I have not been accused of in some time!). Dinner would always begin with saying grace; because the Presuto family was Roman Catholic, the prayer would always begin and end with the sign of the cross, something with which Lutherans were not familiar at the time. Another tradition at their table with which I was unfamiliar was the word they used at the end of the table blessing: *Abbondanza!* It was always shouted with great enthusiasm as the plates of incredible food were passed around the table. Since my parents had warned me not to ask inappropriate questions, I did not ask the meaning of this word that was shouted at every meal in their home until one day I asked Dave in the lunchroom at school what it meant. At first, he looked at me as if I were from another planet; then realizing that my question was sincere, he answered, “It means abundance! We give thanks to God for the abundance we share at the dinner table and the abundant blessings

that God gives us every day. I cannot remember a meal in which we did not celebrate the *Abbondanza* that God has given us.”

While this word did not become a part of my family’s dining tradition, *Abbondanza* encapsulates the thankfulness we all express when we come to the dinner table to give thanks to God for the abundant blessings we receive. This Italian word means “abundance, plenty, or prosperity.” It implies a rich, overflowing, and celebratory amount that we are given to enjoy. In Italy, *Abbondanza* is more than a mere word; it is seen as a way of life, associated with hospitality and generosity. Italians pride themselves on *Abbondanza* when hosting meals, ensuring that guests are well fed and surrounded by warmth. *Abbondanza* also describes a state of well-being beyond material wealth: an abundance of joy, love, and health. “*Abbondanza encapsulates the richness of life itself.*” (Rick LaCouteur).

While the word *Abbondanza* may not be found in Scripture, it describes the way in which God abundantly blesses us as our call to give thanks to the Lord for his abundant blessings and steadfast love. The Psalms call upon us to “*give thanks to the LORD, for he is good ... who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever*” (Psalm 136), and in the Torah Moses calls upon the people of Israel to “*eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you*” (Deuteronomy 8:10). At the Last Supper, Jesus institutes the Sacrament of Holy Communion when “*he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’*” (Matthew 26:27-28). Paul reminds the Corinthians that “*you will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us*” (2 Corinthians 9:11), and encourages the Philippians to “*not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*” (Philippians 4:6). When we gather at the Lord’s Table, we are reminded that “*it is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord*” (ELW Holy Communion).

- “Grace – gifts given without being earned and with no expectation of return – is, as the old hymn says, amazing. Because you can neither earn nor pay back the gift, your heart fills with gratitude. And the power of that emotion transforms the way you see the world and experience life. Grace begets gratitude, which, in turn, widens our hearts toward greater goodness and love. Thanksgiving is a feeling in response to gifts.” – Diana Butler Bass.

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate the blessings of God who is our Good Shepherd, the one who provides an abundance of blessings for us and to whom we are called to give thanks for the blessings our Shepherd showers upon us *“out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.”* (Small Catechism). It is the image that we celebrate in the most beloved of the psalms, confessing that *“the LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want”* (Psalm 23:1). Because *“we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture,”* we are called to *“give thanks to him, bless his name. For the LORD his good, his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations”* (Psalm 100:3-5). Unlike the faithless shepherd-kings of Israel who scattered the flock of God’s people *“over all the earth, with no one to search or seek for them”* (Ezekiel 34:6), the Lord God declares through the prophet that God will be their good shepherd who will care for them, protect them, and abundantly provide for them:

- “I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on the rich pastures of the mountains of Israel.” – Ezekiel 34:13-14.

This rich image of the good shepherd who provides an abundance for his sheep is one of the images that Jesus uses to describe himself and his mission in the Gospel of John. Today’s Gospel lesson is the first portion of the Shepherd Discourse in the Fourth Gospel, the last full public discourse in Jesus’ public ministry before his Farewell Discourse that is addressed to his disciples (14:1-16:33). The discourse begins with the familiar phrase *“very truly, I tell you”* (10:1), which connects this passage back to the previous passage about the healing of a man born blind and the questions that ensue (9:1-1). Readers of John’s Gospel are familiar with the pattern that a miraculous sign from Jesus is then followed by a discourse in which Jesus explains the sign’s significance:

- “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.” – 5:19.
- “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” – 6:26.

The first two verses of our Gospel lesson are one extended sentence in the original text, establishing the identity of the shepherd by first establishing who he is not: *“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.”* (10:1-2). The one who has “authorized access” (enters by the gate) is the true shepherd; the one without authorized access is a thief and a bandit. The identification of one who is a “thief and a bandit” suggests a desire to exploit the sheep for personal benefit. The term for “robber” implies violence; such imagery also resonates with Ezekiel’s indictment of Judah’s leadership for their self-serving exploitation of God’s people (*“You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled over them.”* – Ezekiel 34:4). Unlike the thief and robber, the one with proper access to the sheep, who enters through the gate, is the shepherd for whom the gatekeeper opens the door; the gatekeeper opens the gate, through which the shepherd leads out his sheep to the pasture of eternal life (*“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”* – 10:27-28). The intimacy of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is demonstrated by the sheep’s ability to recognize the shepherd’s voice and the shepherd’s ability to call “his own” by name: *“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice”* (10:3b-4). As a result of this intimacy, the sheep will know the shepherd. The absence of such intimacy with the stranger is defined by voice and movement: *“They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers”* (10:5). As a true disciple is one who hears and receives Jesus’ revelatory word (*“Whoever is from God hears the words of God”* – 8:47), the sheep have only one shepherd and are single-minded in their devotion and attention to him; *“they do not listen to any other leader because no one knows them as their shepherd does”* (Francis Martin and William Wright).

At this point the Evangelist steps in to offer some guidance to his readers as to what Jesus is doing with these images and statements. Jesus’ words are to be understood as more than a depiction of pastoral practices in the Ancient Near East. These words of Jesus are known as a “figure of speech” (*paroimia*) that the Pharisees who are in Jesus’ audience do not understand. Jesus is positioning the Pharisees in the roles of thief, bandit, and stranger; their conduct toward the man who Jesus healed of his blindness (*“They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.”* – 9:34) has demonstrated that they do not have the flock’s best interest at heart, whereas Jesus’ conduct toward this man has

shown him to be the shepherd who comes to the sheep (*“Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ – 9:35*), and to whom the sheep respond:

- *“He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him.” – 9:36-38.*

Jesus now contrasts the positive image of himself as the good shepherd with the negative image of the thief and bandit. Beginning again with *“very truly, I tell you”* (10:7), Jesus identifies himself as the *“gate for the sheep,”* pointing to the ways in which one’s place in the sheepfold and one’s identity as a member of the flock are determined exclusively by one’s relationship to Jesus as the gate; *“one enters the fold through Jesus.”* (Gail O’Day). Jesus’ claim to be the gate is like his self-identification in the Farewell Discourse when he states that *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* (14:6); it also echoes Ezekiel’s promise that the true shepherd will *“seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will strengthen the weak”* (Ezekiel 34:16).

Once again, Jesus contrasts his identity as the true shepherd of the sheep with those who came before him who were thieves and bandits: *“All who came before me were thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.”* (10:8). Jesus is again referring to the religious leaders who discount these witnesses to Jesus and thus attempt another means of access to the sheepfold (*“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” – 5:39-40*). The sheep, however, do not listen to them because they do not have the voice they recognize as the one who comes to bring them life. Jesus emphatically states that he alone is the means of salvation when he proclaims that *“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture”* (10:9). The promise of entering through the gate to find salvation echoes the words of the psalmist and identifies Jesus as the point of access to God for the flock:

- *“Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.” – Psalm 118:19-20.*

The promise of finding pasture echoes the words of Psalm 23 in which our shepherd Lord *“makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for this name’s sake”* (Psalm 23:2-3).

Jesus' promise of pasture also recalls his earlier promises of the gifts of water and bread that will end thirst and hunger:

- “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” – 4:14.
- “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” – 6:35.

Jesus again contrasts his actions as the true shepherd and gate for the sheep with those of the thief who “*comes only to steal and kill and destroy*” (10:10a). All these activities are harmful to the sheep as they deal in death and destruction. By contrast, Jesus proclaims that the true shepherd “*came that they may have life and have it abundantly*” (10:10 b). This is one of the central affirmations of the Gospel, that Jesus is the one who brings life and abundance to God's people, the one who came so that “*all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day*” (6:40).

- “This abundant life has been glimpsed in images of abundant wine at a wedding celebration and so much bread and fish on a Galilean hillside and will be seen in a love that reaches beyond death and a life that does not stay dead. Jesus not only is life, but he also brings that life to others: a life that is abundant in its amount, like bread and fish, and in its quality, like the wine. This life is available through this gate and this shepherd, who will lay down his own life for the sheep.” – Laura Holmes.

The abundance of which Jesus speaks does include all that we need for daily living, the “daily bread” that includes “*all the necessities and nourishment for our bodies*” (*Small Catechism*) that God gives to us; it also includes the abundance, of grace, faith, hope, and love that God showers upon us, the hope of everlasting life, the love that knows no limits, and the faith which is “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1). It is the abundance that feeds our physical bodies even as it feeds our hearts and minds with the sure and certain knowledge that our God is with us and will provide us all we need until that day when our Good Shepherd will lead us to our eternal home.

- “The ‘I am’ statements of John 10, then, deepen the array of images of Jesus available to the church. The images of Jesus at the gate and the good shepherd are intensely relational; they have no meaning without the presence of the sheep. These ‘I am’ statements do not simply reveal who Jesus is, but more

specifically reveal who Jesus is in relationship to those who follow him. The identity of Jesus and the identity of the community that gathers around him are inextricably linked.” – O’Day.

The *Abbondanza* that I experienced at the Presuto family’s table was not only in the abundance of food that we shared; it was in the fellowship of those who gathered at that table who experienced the abundance of love with those who shared the meal. Whether or not we use this word, we experience this *Abbondanza* of abundant blessings from our shepherd of abundance, the one who provides all we need and blesses us with the people with whom we share life and love. It is an abundance for which we always give thanks to our shepherd of abundance as we give thanks in the knowledge that “*all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. We thank you, Lord, we thank you, Lord, for all your love.*” (ELW Hymn 681).

Amen.