

Sermon – John 10:1-10
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Grace Lutheran Church
4 Easter – Year A
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“Life Abundant”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

1. You would think that after six years I would be able to remember. That after nearly two months of being together almost all of the time, I'd really have it down. Sad to say, it's not enough. I can't seem to remember which name goes with which of my children. I call Anders Torsten, and I call Torsten Anders. The gender difference doesn't slow me down. I'm liable to call Greta by one of her brother's names. For that matter, I mix up Greta and Erika, her mother. I take comfort in the memory of my mom not only calling me by my brother Chris's name but, on occasion, referring to me as Fluffy. Fluffy was our dog. Fluffy and I don't look that much alike although, to be fair to my mom, the resemblance was stronger when I had hair. Fortunately, my children don't seem hurt or insulted by my inability to know who is who. They see it as a sign of my dotage, a reason to laugh at their old man. Of course, I get it right when it matters. In the face of a skinned knee, a nighttime imagination run wild, or a global pandemic, I know their names. Holding their hands, stroking their hair, I'll speak their name and promise it will get better. That's what we need to when the chips are down, that someone who loves us knows our name. Knows who we are and loves us anyway. Comes to us in our need to show us the way safely forward.
2. Near the end of his ministry, Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd. Jesus wants us to know that he isn't like the others. He is no thief or bandit; neither is he a hired hand. He is the One who speaks to his sheep and calls

them by name. The pastoral scene in John 10 is full of intimacy centered on this Shepherd who can tell his sheep apart, who knows each one so well by name that a Boston bartender would be proud, who is trusted by the sheep because they've come to know the tone of his voice, the rhythm of his speech as it rises and falls. They know that the Shepherd has kept them safe so far, that there is no reason to believe that he will let them down now.

3. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, over 240,000 people have died, more than 65,000 of them in our country. The numbers are staggering, even if most people recover. Even if the percentages are small. The numbers are too big to really wrap one's mind around. But the numbers aren't just data points. Each of these people was, of course, a person. Someone with a history. Someone who loved and was loved. Someone who had a name, whispered to them once by a parent. How many more, O Lord? How high will the number go? The psalm most familiar to most of us puts it this way: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.* Is this not where we are now?

4. Yes, but it's not where the Good Shepherd leaves us. The psalmist speaks of grace and mercy, gifts found in a Shepherd who is not waiting for us on the other side of challenge and sorrow and death, but who walks with us. Protects us from our enemies. Feeds us with overflowing abundance. Gives us all that we need, offering nothing less than himself. This Good Shepherd who is also the Lamb of God, in whose death we find life. Who gives us a name connected to that most precious identity: child of God. Walter Brueggeman writes: "It is God's companionship that transforms every situation. It does not mean (that) there are no deathly valleys, no enemies. But they are not capable of hurt, and so the powerful loyalty and solidarity of Yahweh comfort, precisely in the situations of threat."

5. A little bit later today, little Emerson will be brought to the font of grace. Through simple words and ordinary water, Emerson will become a little sheep of Jesus' flock. As sin and death are washed away, his ears will learn to hear the voice of the One who knows him better than he'll ever know himself. The Christ who will never forget him, because Christ already lives on the other side of death. Forever, Emerson's story will be part of God's story, throughout life and in the face of death.

6. Death came to Grace again this week, claiming the life of Al Hillmer. Many members of Grace are grieving the deaths of other loved ones this week, too. But because of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, death has become nothing more than the gate into the eternal sheepfold, a paradise of protection where they can safely graze under the watchful eye of Jesus. Beyond death's grasp forever. Shadows, after all, have no power to them. They are dark, menacing, but they have no teeth. Death's shadow is just the last vestige of a predator already put to flight, backlit by the growing dawn of Easter bursting over the horizon of a new heaven and a new earth. This week, Jesus spoke to Al. And to loved ones named Thomas and David and Hedwig and Betty and Lillian. The Shepherd's voice is stronger than death. He will not lose any of his flock. These saints have been called to live safely in God's house forever.

7. In between baptism and death is the life of discipleship, of sheep following their Shepherd. A hallmark of this Shepherd's pastures is that they are both verdant and safe, overflowing with life abundant. *I shall not want*. The Church has understood this from its earliest days, since Peter preached on Pentecost and the Spirit's fiery breath flooded creation. We heard in our first reading this morning how "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." I suppose one could try to use this as a blueprint for economic theory but for Christians, it's simply what we're

called to do. We use what we have not simply for ourselves, but to bless those around us. Especially the sheep who are the most vulnerable. *I shall not want. My cup overflows. He came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* The sheepfold is a place of protection for all. Our call as Christians is to make this world look a little bit more like the green pastures to come, a whole lot less like a cruel machine that neither cares for us nor knows our names. In caring for the vulnerable and those in need, in learning their names, and joining their stories, we witness to the grace and mercy of our Shepherd. We enlarge the sheepfold of God's love.

8. We do this because God knows their names. I wrote yesterday of an early misadventure in my pastoral ministry. I was spending the summer doing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at a nursing home in Oshkosh, WI. One of my duties was to lead worship for those who lived in the dementia care unit. Because I was 24 and brilliant and didn't know a darn thing, when my first time to lead came around I planned a fairly full worship service. I even tried to preach a sermon. I didn't yet know these people and they didn't know me. My words had no meaning. A CNA working the unit came up to me and whispered with a wisdom that proved she had learned more in a certification program lasting a few weeks than I had during four years of college and half a master's program. Throwing me a lifeline, she said, "Use words they know." The first thing that came to mind was Psalm 23, in the poetry commissioned by King James. "The Lord is my shepherd," I tentatively offered up. "I shall not want," replied. We were off and running, God's long-received words of hope and comfort pouring forth from the lips of these dear people who were slowly losing themselves in the mists of dementia. There was so much they no longer knew; some didn't know who they were. But Jesus knew how to speak to them. Jesus hadn't forgotten them. Jesus still knew their names.
9. Friends, during these dark days, know that the Shepherd walks with you. He knows your name; you hear his voice. The valley won't last forever. The feast

of the Lamb is already set, an abundance that no cup can fully contain. Hear Jesus speak to you, for he calls you out of death and into life. Eternal and abundant life. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.

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