

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

I want to begin with the end of our text today, and work backwards from there. Jesus said at the end, *“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”*

The evangelist John, of the four evangelists, sets life before us as Jesus’ purpose for descending from the Father’s side to become flesh and dwell among us. *“In him was life ...”* (Jn 1:4); *“whoever believes in [the only Son] should not perish but have eternal life”* (Jn 3:16); *“The water that I will give ... will become ... a spring of water welling up to eternal life”* (Jn 4:14); *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me”* (Jn 5:39); *“I am the bread of life”* (Jn 6:35); *“the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”* (Jn 6:51); there are many more, but here is one more, the one we heard a couple weeks ago: *“these [words] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”* (Jn 20:31).

Today again, Jesus says, *“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* And just to be clear, Jesus isn’t talking about the crass, material abundance that the prosperity preachers proclaim, who like to hold up their own wealth gained by deceiving their hearers and bilking them out of their scarce resources; and then giving them a guilt trip, asserting that if only they had the same kind of faith, they’d have this abundant life, also. Thieves and robbers they are, stealing and killing and destroying!

*“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* That life that Jesus talks about and that the Evangelist likes to proclaim is eternal life, but who are the *“they”*? *“They”* are the sheep, the sheep that enter into the sheepfold by the door, by Jesus. They are the ones who are *“saved,”* Jesus says. They are the ones who go in and out—into the safety of the sheep pen, out to graze in green pastures and drink from the quiet waters.

They are those who recognize their shepherd. They know their shepherd because He Himself entered by the door, and when he speaks they hear a familiar voice. They recognize it; they follow it.

Who are *“they”* today? They may be Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; it doesn’t matter. They are one flock, the church, and what binds them together is that they recognize the voice of their shepherd, Jesus, in the undershepherd that the Holy Spirit gave to them. They follow that shepherd, because they know that, when they are listening to him, they are listening to Jesus, as he presents not himself, but Jesus as Savior, Jesus as the One who came to give life and give it abundantly.

They don't listen to the voice of strangers, although there are thousands that daily climb over the fence rather than go through the Door. These strangers are false shepherds, who in Ezekiel's day did "*not feed the sheep*," who did not strengthen the weak, or heal the sick, or bind up the injured, or seek out the straying, who ruled harshly with force and scattered the flock (Ezek. 34). In Jesus' day, He called them thieves and robbers; there are still false teachers today who try to steal you away from Jesus, who seek to kill you by leading you into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice, who destroy you by deceiving you and turning your hearts toward earthly treasures, easily destroyed by moth and rust.

But Jesus' sheep do not listen to these strangers. They are bound together as one as they "*go in and out*" through the Door, through Jesus, fed in green pastures, drinking from the pure streams that flow from Jesus.

Are you one of His sheep? There truly is "*one flock*" and "*one shepherd*." Are you as smart as "*a seven-year-old child [who] knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd*" (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article XII).

Do you believe what Jesus teaches? That He is the Door to life, even the abundant life, and that there is no other way? That no one comes to the Father except through Jesus? That there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved?

In my studies this week, I came across an interesting reference, and what I'm about to share is heavily quoted from this person. Although the Lord teaches that "He alone is the way to eternal life," and "this [life] comes through faith in him," yet, "recent surveys have found that the majority of Christians in the U.S. believe that 'good people' and even non-Christians may attain eternal life," denying what Jesus just taught.

This analysis came from the 2006 Faith Matters Survey discussed in the book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. In it, the authors saw "a disconnect between the leaders at the pulpits and the people in the pews." They reported, "Most Christian clergy see salvation as exclusively Christian, while most Christians have a more—if not completely—inclusive view of who will be saved in the hereafter." So, there's the disconnect: between what the undershepherds are preaching and what the sheep are believing.

Now you might be surprised that Missouri Synod Lutherans were a part of this extensive survey that yielded these results. It was reported that some Missouri Synod theologians were. They met with one of the authors of the report. They were "shocked," it was reported, "that such a high percentage of Americans believe that there are many ways to get to heaven. One [of those] theologian spoke up firmly that those who believe that are simply wrong. And judging from murmurs of

approval from the group, he was not alone in his opinion. In an attempt to reconcile this apparent heresy, another member of the audience proposed that, surely, Missouri Synod Lutherans do not take such a casual view toward salvation.” What then happened was “an on-the-spot analysis of the 2006 Faith Matters data stored on [the author’s] laptop [which] revealed that 86 percent of Missouri Synod Lutherans said that a good person who is not of their faith [which must surely mean, who is not Christian] could indeed go to heaven.” “Upon hearing this news,” the report goes, “these theologians were stunned into silence. One wanly said that as teachers of the Word, they had failed.” [Concordia Theology, Joel Okamoto, Homiletical Help].

I too find that result astounding. I’m stunned by it. And maybe I’m just naïve, but I don’t believe that 86 percent of you believe that: that 86 percent of you believe that there is salvation apart from Jesus, that 86 percent of you believe that there are other paths, other doors, other truths whereby you are saved, that 86 percent of you reject the voice of your Shepherd and are listening to the voice of strangers, thieves and robbers.

But if that is so, I say, “Repent!” You are straying from the truth. Return “*to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*” In Him alone is life. Listen closely for His voice. Stop listening to the cacophony of stranger’s voices that lead you astray, that steal from you, and will kill and destroy you. Believe in the One who laid down His life for you and took it back up. Believe and live. Test your pastor’s words to make sure you are hearing your Shepherd’s voice through him—your pastor is but a man, after all. And God grant you renewed devotion in hungering for the green pastures and quiet waters of the apostle’s teaching, the holy communion of Christ’s body and blood, and the prayers. Let us be faithful to “*Come, ... worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God,*” our Shepherd, and heaven’s Door for “*the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.*”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.