

**John 10:1-10** *“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. 7Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

“Lions, tigers and bears, oh my!” “Lions, tigers and bears, oh my!” Can you picture Dorothy walking arm in arm with the Tin Man and Scarecrow down the yellow brick road through the dark forest towards the city of Oz repeating this phrase with all 3 of them were scared and on the look out for dangerous animals that could eat them? Their fear led them to walk lightly and quickly with their eyes scanning left and right always on the lookout for lions or tigers or bears. Though just in a dream, their fears were understandable. These animals are bigger, stronger and can easily overpower and kill you—and without hesitation. In the real world, these animals are nothing to mess with. The best form of defense is to keep as far away from them as possible. Be on the lookout, keep away from them and don’t put yourself in a foolish position to be harmed. “Lions, tigers and bears, oh my!”

Why do I bring this up? If we encountered a lion, a tiger or a bear in real life, we wouldn’t walk up to any of them and try to pet them. We would recognize the danger and stay as far away as possible. Yet, when it comes to the spiritual world, we are much less cautious and much more willing to not only put with but try to pet the lions, tigers and bears that are in our spiritual world. Today, Jesus uses a vivid illustration to help us understand how dangerous false shepherds are to help us better appreciate the Good Shepherd that he is. He compares false shepherds to thieves and robbers as well as lions, tigers and bears and reminds us that their work only serves to bring death and destruction. In contrast, he as the Good Shepherd not only brings life, but gives to his people life to the full! Let’s heed this warning from our Good Shepherd to be on the lookout for these false shepherds and recognize the dangers that they bring and his encouragement to live the fullness of life that he brings. ***Lions, Tigers and Bears, Oh My!***

Part of the issue for is that I don’t think we would normally go so far as to call false shepherds thieves or robbers...or lions, tigers or bears. We live in a world that doesn’t want to give people labels, especially labels that would be seen as negative or condemning. We don’t want to call prophets false for fear of being accused by others of judging them. In an effort to show respect to everyone and what is labeled as love in our world, we are accepting of people who teach differently from what God says in Scripture. We would rather be accepting of a teaching which is untrue and not what God says in scripture than be called unloving by those in the world around us. We see people who are nice, sincere, caring and whose intent is only to help people and we gloss over what is plainly wrong in their teaching. We would never want to be so cruel as to call them thieves or robbers or lions or tigers or bears. By being accepting of the person, we become accepting of the teaching and complicit in the spread of false doctrine.

The point Jesus makes today is very blunt and clear. Those false shepherds who teach anything other than what he proclaims in his word are really only thieves and robbers who come only to steal and kill. That sounds harsh and blunt, and perhaps it is. Yet this is the truth Jesus lays out before us. As the Good Shepherd, he is the only gate to eternal life. The only way to enter into God’s eternal kingdom is through the sacrifice Jesus made as the one and only Savior from sin. The picture that he places before us plays off the practice at Jesus’ time of protecting the flock at night against thieves and robbers by enclosing an open space with a hedge that the sheep could not hurdle. Within the enclosure was the doorkeeper who cared for the sheep. When the shepherd arrived in the morning, the door was opened. He would walk through the gate, call his own sheep by name and lead them out to the pasture for the day. The sheep wouldn’t follow the voice of anyone other than their own shepherd and only the shepherd would be allowed in at the gate. So anyone who tried to come in by any other means was a thief and robber who wanted only to steal the sheep. The sheep pen is the kingdom of God. Jesus is both the shepherd of the sheep and the gate through which the sheep enter into his kingdom. Anyone who taught anything other than Jesus as the gate to eternal life are the thieves and robbers who want only to destroy the sheep.

Jesus told this pointed parable against the Pharisees who were the religious leaders of the Jewish people. In the previous chapter, Jesus had healed a man who had been blind by birth and gave him the gift of sight. The problem, at least as the Pharisees were concerned, was that Jesus did this on the Sabbath Day. He not only displayed his power which brought him influence with the people, but they considered that what he had done broke the Sabbath law. When they questioned this man about who did this for him, he proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah sent by God. When he wouldn’t change his testimony, they banned him from the temple and spoke against Jesus. This is what prompted the illustration in our text. The Pharisees were outwardly good people. They were acting with good intent. They thought they were serving God and protecting his name and his law. In their minds, they were defending God by throwing this man out of the temple who claimed Jesus to be the Christ. They truly believed they were acting in God’s best interest by standing up to Jesus who dared to heal on the Sabbath. They were sincere in their service toward God. They acted with the best of intentions. But they were wrong. Instead of bringing the people closer to God as they were supposed to be doing as the religious

leaders of the people, and even thought that they were doing, they were instead leading the people away from God and into destruction. They proved themselves to be false shepherds. Instead of building the people up by pointing them to the Messiah who had come to rescue them from their sins, they rejected Jesus as the Messiah and pointed the people to themselves as the examples to emulate in their religious lives. They were leading the people astray and destroying the church by separating the people from their Savior and God's truth. They were trying to gain an illegal and illegitimate entrance into the heart of the people so they could preserve their own position of power and influence over them. They were trying to steal the sheep from God by fear and intimidation. They robbed the people of the sure hope of forgiveness and life that Jesus offered by means of the burdensome laws they forced the people to follow. Rather than drawing the people to God, they were separating them further from him. They were not bringing life to his people. They were leading them to death.

This emphasizes for us just what is at stake here. This is truly a life or death matter. The consequences are spiritual life or spiritual death. With those consequences we ought to be traveling through our spiritual lives alert and alive, reciting, "Lions, tigers and bears, oh my!" Intent doesn't matter. Sincerity doesn't matter. Truth matters. God doesn't let us into heaven through the gate because of what shepherd we follow. He lets us in because of our faith in the Good Shepherd and him alone. So we aren't to judge earthly shepherds by their intent nor by their sincerity. We judge them by their faithfulness to the truth. Sadly, there are still many false shepherds today trying to steal sheep from God. That may not be their intent, but it is the sad result of their work. What they say may sound good. They might be very compassionate and speak reassuring words. They might have a sincere smile. But if they preach anything other than the truth that salvation comes only through Jesus alone, they with their teaching only destroy precious souls. While they may say it, what they offer is not life. Jesus offers these words to us to be able to recognize the voice of these false shepherds and run the other way. Today, these voices might sound like: You don't have to be religious to be spiritual. As long as you have some sort of spiritual feeling inside of you, you will be fine before God. Some preach a prosperity gospel which says that as long as you do this or that or follow this pattern or plan, prosperity will follow as a sign of God smiling on you. Some say we should be accepting of all religions or thoughts because they all lead to the same place. Lions, tigers and bears, oh my!

Jesus said there is only one gate into the sheep pen and he is that gate. In the end, all of these other voices—no matter how nice or sincere they may be—rob the souls of their spiritual life and bring death to those who follow. They place the burden for one's spiritual welfare on one's own shoulders. They take the focus off of Christ. Without Christ, there is no life. There is only death.

Jesus gives what no one else can give: life to the full. What Jesus offers is an overflowing, abundance of life because he alone is the gate through which anyone can enter into eternal life. Some would argue that this is an exclusive thought. Yet, it truly is just the opposite. It really is all inclusive. Anyone who enters through Jesus enters into the fullness of life that he alone gives. Through the gate, Jesus offers the abundance of grace, joy and peace. He alone brings complete forgiveness, life and salvation to his people. He alone gives the ability to live for him and to be free from slavery to sin and the devil. What your Good Shepherd offers to you is life in every sense of the word. He is the only one who perfectly followed the voice of his Father in heaven. He actively obeyed the Father in our place and offered his life so that we could not know death but life and have life to the full. Through this work, he offers real life—the forgiveness of sins, freedom from guilt and shame, the absence of fears and worries from everyday life and life that will last to eternity.

This is what Christ's victory at the cross and the empty grave means for our everyday lives. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep by name, leads them, protects them and gives them enduring life. Jesus knows each of his sheep by name. What a thought! He knows each of you individually and personally. He calls you by name. You are each dear to his loving heart. He embraces you with tender care and devotion. He knows you, cares for you and protects you. In those lonely times, he is right there holding you tightly. As you walk through the dark valleys of life, valleys dark with trouble, sorrow, sadness and hurt—even death, he is there with his rod and staff to comfort you. There is no reason to fear. He provides everything that we need for our lives here and our spiritual lives for eternity.

This is the abundance of life we have through our Good Shepherd. If you asked the question of many different people what it means to live life to the full, you would have as many different answers as people you asked. These answers might range from having an abundance of comfort, wealth or earthly things. They might talk about taking advantage of every opportunity you have and leaving this world with no regrets. They might talk about living life to your maximum capacity or living it large or never settling for less than what you are capable of living. But all of this doesn't even come close to matching the abundance of life your Good Shepherd gives to you. He gives to you the abundance of eternal life that is yours now and will be for all eternity. He gives you the abundance of knowing the protection, care and guidance God gives as we live our lives. He gives you the overflowing joy of living confident in God's grace in a way that pleases him and brings him glory. Your Good Shepherd wants for you nothing but the best that he alone gives. What more could we want? Why would we give all of that up to follow shepherds who only lead to destruction? Heed the warning of Jesus today and be on alert for false shepherds who would lead you away from your Savior. Listen to his encouragement to live the fullness of life only he can give. ***Lions, Tigers and Bears, Oh My!*** Amen