

April 26, 2026—The Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Rev. James Wyatt

And Have It Abundantly

“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. He goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

When I was in seminary, I got to hear a sermon by the Reverend Joan Brown Campbell, who had recently been elected to serve as the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches. She preached on this text from the Gospel of John, and in the course of her sermon she explained how she’d been trying to come up with a modern equivalent to the Biblical image of a shepherd. She said it came to her one day when she saw a group of kids and teachers from a day care center walking together along the street. Day care teachers, she said, are the closest thing that modern American society has to Biblical shepherds.

As I recall (and I heard this sermon 35 years ago, so I freely admit that my recollection might be less than perfect), Campbell’s comparison of Biblical shepherds and modern day-care providers was sort of two-pronged. On the one hand, like Biblical shepherds, those who teach small children are models of care and love, who provide for every need and keep their charges safe from harm. On the other hand, like Biblical shepherds, those who teach small children are shown very little respect by society, they’re underpaid, and they have virtually no political power.

Well, I liked that image a lot. At the time I heard that sermon, I was teaching Sunday School to 1st and 2nd graders, and I’d worked as a day care teacher for each of the previous five summers. And I still think about it, 35 years later, every time the lectionary presents us with one of the many Biblical texts that speak of shepherds.

So when Jesus says, “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep,” we might hear that as, “The one who enters the day care center by the main entrance is the teacher of the children. The door-keeper opens the gate for her, and the children hear her voice. She calls her own students by name and leads them out. She goes ahead of them, and the children follow her because they know her voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Oh, friends, if only it were that easy!

I think it’s a pretty fundamental task of the Christian spiritual life to discern the voice of Jesus, our shepherd, our teacher, and distinguish it from all the other voices—voices that cry out to us, shouting from our TVs and social media feeds, voices that whisper in our deepest thoughts and try to tell us who we are, and what we should do, and what we should hold dear. It is not always easy, I’m afraid, and we are always in danger of following the wrong teacher, of being led astray by thieves and bandits.

So how do we tell the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, from all these other voices? How do we tell if a voice is true?

When I was 19, I heard Jesus sing to me. I tend to say that a little jokingly, because really I just had a song pop into my head, the way that songs often do. Maybe it was a perfectly ordinary experience of a memory popping up, some construction of my imagination. But the *effect* of that song was powerful and transformative. It completely changed my mood in that moment—I felt like I’d seen a glimpse of the glorious future that God has promised us, I’d tasted a little bit of heaven. But more than that, hearing the voice of Jesus like that completely changed the course of my life, for the better: that experience led to me calling myself Christian and having the audacity to stand up and preach. It’s literally why I’m here.

So that’s one of the key tools we have for this kind of discernment: Thieves and bandits come to kill and destroy, Jesus said, and wolves come to snatch and scatter us, but the good shepherd comes “that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” I say that I heard Jesus sing to me because what that song, that voice gave me was abundant life.

We have a lot of internal voices, which are not necessarily geared toward leading us to abundant life. For example, I've wrestled with depression, off and on, through much of my life, and one of the ways I've learned to deal with it is to identify my depression as a voice in my head that feeds me all kinds of lies—lies about my worth, lies about my prospects, lies about how other people feel about me. That voice does not want me to have abundant life. It wants me to live miserably, or maybe not to live at all. I know it lies; I know it's not the voice of the good shepherd. But it took me a lot of years to learn how to distinguish its voice. Maybe for you it's not depression, but other sort of mental habits, maybe a response to past trauma, or scripts you learned in your family growing up, which are always reminding you of the worst that can happen or questioning your motives or undermining your hope, or sabotaging your happiness. These voices are thieves and bandits, trying to steal and kill and destroy.

But it's not just internal voices that try to lead us astray. I think about the world of advertising, which does not want us to live abundantly. It wants us to spend extravagantly, which is most definitely not the same thing. It wants us to be very aware of what we lack, so that we go buy things in a vain effort to fill the holes it has created. It wants us to fear missing out or being left behind, to fear looking ugly or unfashionable, to fear smelling bad ... so that we go out and buy whatever it is they're selling. These are very loud voices blaring from the TV or the radio or the internet, but they can also be very subtle voices, because advertising is big business and they know what they're doing! They've studied and studied how our minds work so that they can exploit our fundamental psychology and get us to buy more. They're very, very good at what they do. But make no mistake, these voices that nurture our fear are thieves and bandits who come to the sheepfold to steal and destroy.

The voices of politics in our country right now are also very loud and very divisive. For starters, the insidious lies of racism and nationalism have grown from subtle whispers and dog whistles to loud chants and social media posts in the last decade or so. These voices, too, do not want us to live abundantly. They want us to live in fear. They want American citizens to fear that immigrants might take our jobs. They want Christians to fear that Jewish people might "replace us" (as they chanted in Charlottesville years ago), or that Muslims might try to impose their religious law on us. They want white suburbanites to fear that downtown protests will turn into race riots. They want white people to fear and hate anyone who's not white. They want us to fear hidden conspiracies and secret cabals, and both sides of the political spectrum want us to fear and despise the other side, and these voices, too, my friends, are thieves and bandits who seek to prey on the sheep.

But here's the thing about all these thieves and bandits: they would have us believe, because maybe they themselves believe, that goodness and blessing are scarce commodities, that we need to scramble and fight to claim our own tiny slice of the pie. But the Good Shepherd "came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The Good Shepherd "makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters" and "spreads a table before me... and my cup is running over." The Good Shepherd, like a good day care teacher, feeds us healthy snacks and lays us down for nap time and takes us outside to play in the sun and leads us on safe paths, where we need fear no evil.

Goodness and blessing are not scarce. God's love and grace are more abundant than we can possibly imagine. Knowing that, really knowing that in the depths of our hearts, really makes the voice of the Good Shepherd stand out from the lies, the voices inside and outside that speak of scarcity and fear.

Knowing the abundance of God's grace sets me free from the fear that I'm not good enough. Knowing the abundance of God's blessings sets me free from the need to acquire and hoard, free to share and to help those in need. Knowing the abundance of God's love sets me free from the fear of my neighbors, free to love them with equal abundance, whoever they are.

May God, our Good Shepherd, revive our souls and guide us along right pathways. May God comfort and anoint us, and may goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives. Amen.