Theme Verse: John 10:10 (NRSV)

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Suggested scripture reading: John 10:1-10 or John 10:1-15 (NRSV)

10 “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. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Suggestions for additional scripture readings:

- *Psalm 23 (KJV)* – This famous Psalm resonates with the metaphor of sheep, pasture, and shepherding that Jesus lays out throughout John 10, especially his quote in John 10:11/14 “I am the good shepherd.” Verse after verse, Psalm 23 also characterizes the life of abundance promised in our theme scripture. The KJV is the classic, best-loved version of this scripture, and it’s the translation I recommend.

- *Ephesians 3:14-21 (NIV or The Message)* – This prayer in Ephesians explores another dimension of the abundance found in Jesus, specifically the expansiveness and lavishness...
of Jesus’ love. I was drawn to either the NIV version or the Message version. The Message paraphrase poetically and evocatively describes the deep dimensions of Christ’s love, and brings the reader of the text into the exploration of that love. Meanwhile, the NIV translation gives a clearer sense of the power and strength that we can find in a life lived with Jesus. I think either version fits the theme well.

Key themes:

- **Abundance** – Jesus is the way to a life that is rich with meaning, purpose, and belonging. We might not always have a lot of “stuff,” but a life in Jesus means blessings, joy, fulfillment, and relationships that give us more than we can imagine.

- **Leadership of the church/role models in your faith journey** – The scripture speaks of “shepherds” who protect and guide us and “thieves” who would do us harm. We can think of these as leaders in our church and role models in our lives. Who are the “shepherds” that we trust to guide and teach us, and who are “thieves” of whom we should be wary? We can tell them apart by how they relate to Jesus: Do they resonate with, emulate, and lift up Jesus, or do they seek to evade him? Of course, Jesus, the “good shepherd,” is the ultimate leader of our church and the best role model we can possibly find.

- **Christ as the “gate”** – Jesus is the way into safe harbor and green pasture. He keeps us safe, delivers us salvation, and gives us a life that is full, bountiful, and beautiful, in all the ways that truly matter.

- **Christ as the “good shepherd”** – Jesus is the one person who we can always trust and never need to doubt. He knows each of us intimately, and he calls each of us by name. He is our protector, teacher, comforter, and guide.

**Historical context/Unpacking the metaphor:**

Jesus’ metaphor about being the “gate” for the sheep can be a little confusing without understanding historic shepherding practices. We’ve often heard Jesus referred to as a “shepherd” – in fact, he calls himself “the good shepherd” later in John 10. But what does Jesus mean when he calls himself the “gate” in verses 7 and 9?

In Jesus’ time, some shepherds would keep their flocks in “sheepfolds” at night to protect them. A sheepfold was an enclosed pen with fencing on all sides and one gate for the sheep and their shepherds to walk in and out. Keeping sheep in a sheepfold at night was safer than trying to guard them in a dark, open field. This way, sheep couldn’t wander off in the darkness, and they would be better protected from predators and thieves. It also allowed shepherds to take turns resting in the night, since it required fewer eyes to watch over a sheepfold than an exposed flock in an open pasture.
When Jesus refers to himself as the “gate,” he’s saying that he is the proper way in and out of the sheepfold. Jesus is the threshold through which we find safety in the darkness and through which we come out to green pastures in the morning. He is our way to eternal life through salvation, and he’s also our way to an abundant life here on Earth, one that is rich with meaning, purpose, and belonging.

Furthermore, the gate helps us discern good leaders and mentors in our faith journey. Shepherds, those leaders of the church who keep us safe and can lead us to Christ, come into the sheepfold or exit to the pasture through the gate (10:2). In contrast, Jesus says that thieves, those who would do us harm, instead enter the sheepfold by climbing over the side (10:1). In other words, those who seek to care for and nurture the church by lifting up the teachings of Jesus and continuing his work are good and trustworthy leaders and teachers. However, those who seem dissonant with Jesus or try to evade his teachings and example shouldn’t be regarded as people to trust and obey.

Jr. Highers seeking out good role models, mentors, and peers, inside the church and in daily life, will do well to remember to look for those who come through the gate! Of course, Jesus later calls himself the “good shepherd:” (10:11/14) he is the ultimate role model, and one who we can always trust to work for our wellbeing and fulfillment.

There’s one more layer to the metaphor.

Keeping sheep in a sheepfold was expensive. Unless you owned land and built your own sheepfold—not exactly an option for most shepherds—you had to buy the right to keep your sheep in someone else’s sheepfold. Most shepherds could only afford this option by sharing sheepfolds with other shepherds. This meant that there would be multiple flocks sharing the same pen. Imagine what a mess it was to sort out all those sheep the next morning into their proper flocks, and not just because counting sheep makes you fall asleep!

However, sheep were hardwired to recognize and trust their shepherd, and nobody else. Shepherds could enter the sheepfold, call out for their flock (sometimes even by calling each sheep’s name), and only the sheep belonging to that shepherd would flock to him. They recognized their shepherd’s voice, but they would not trust or follow strangers or thieves. Jesus refers to this process in verses 3-5 and 14-15. We know, trust, and love our good shepherd, Jesus, because he calls upon each of us by name and we recognize his caring voice and the life of abundance that he promises.

In summary:

- Jesus is the gate, the way through which we find salvation and joy.
- “Shepherds” or good leaders/teachers, come into our lives through Jesus, the gate. They also lead and guide us through Jesus, his teachings, and his example.
- “Thieves,” those who would do us harm, do not enter through Jesus, the gate, but rather try to evade Jesus. They do not resonate with Jesus’ words or reflect his example.
- Jesus is the ultimate shepherd, the one we can always trust as a teacher, mentor, and savior.
• We know our shepherd because his voice is dear to us, and because he calls us by our names.

**Sermon outline example:**

It’s always a great idea to invite a Jr. Higher (or several) to deliver the sermon on Jr. High Sunday! This outline is one way that a Jr. High student could choose to structure a sermon based on the day’s theme, Abundant Life in Jesus.

**Start with a story**

• This is often a good way to start a sermon. Your story could be about abundance: in your life, in the church, in your community, or even in another story, such as a historical figure, fictional character, etc.

**Restate/reflect on the theme**

• Use the theme statement to your advantage! Nobody will remember everything that you say in your sermon. But if you emphasize the theme statement, chances are, most people will remember that phrase: “Abundant life in Jesus.” Talk about it!
• It may be helpful to distinguish between “material abundance” and the abundance that we’re talking about: an abundant life in God.
  o Material abundance means having a lot of stuff: money, electronics, toys, extravagant food, a big house, fancy cars, stylish clothes, etc.
  o God’s abundance blesses us with the things that make life meaningful and worthwhile: family, friends, community, church, joy, etc. Most importantly, a relationship with God, and the feeling of worth, belonging, and salvation that comes along with it.
  o It might be helpful to give examples. Share a story or example God’s true abundance, not in the things we have, but in the people and memories that make life truly special.

**Get the congregation involved/thinking**

• You can keep your audience engaged by giving them something to think about. You could ask them to think about ways that they see abundance in their lives thanks to Jesus.

**Discuss the scripture**

• Return to the theme scripture (John 10:10) and surrounding verses (John 10:1-15). It’s ok to re-read it during the sermon if that’s helpful.
• Analyze what the scripture is saying, especially as it relates to an abundant life in Jesus.
  o Highlight a few of the key themes discussed above.
  o Relay some of the historical context/metaphor analysis discussed above.
  o Ask your pastor for additional help about explaining what the scripture.
• Restate the theme verse.
Share another story

- Stories are often helpful for bringing a sermon to a close. You could share a story about someone turning to God and finding abundance through that relationship. Again, this could be about you, a family member or friend, your church or community, or about a historical or fictional character.

End with a prayer

- Lead the congregation in a prayer related to the scripture and theme.