In the name of the Father and of the ☺ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before I dive into my sermon, let me pause to wish Happy Mother’s Day to you. We all have mothers, and for many of us, the gentle influence of mother carries us along even into old age and helps me us better people. After our Deacons meeting during Coffee Hour, I have plans like many of you do. I mean to change into my blue jeans and dash off to a barbecue with my wife, Carol. We seem to have a lovely day for it. I hope you all have a good day today. Now to the sermon:

I think I detect two themes in today’s Gospel Lesson. One is a sad, the other is happier. Here are the two verses along those lines. First, the sad one:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; (John 10:1, RSV)

This verse is about the possibility of false shepherds.

The other verse talks about the individual and loving knowledge the true Shepherd has of each of his sheep.

To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (John 10:3, RSV)

I think this is a delightful verse.

**Alas, false shepherds**

Let’s begin with the sad one. Earlier this week, my wife, Carol, sent me a text message from Germany, where she was on a tour of the Luther sites. This was a kind of scouting mission for Carol, to help prepare her for next year when she leads a Wartburg Tour of the Luther sites. I hope to go on that tour and maybe you can come too, which would be fun.

So Carol sent me a text message, all excited because she had just seen the pulpit from which Luther so often preached. Luther was a professor, and so he spent most of his time preparing lectures and writing books and treatises. Luther was astonishingly productive. The *Weimer Edition* of Luther’s works, which is the complete edition of his writings, is 120 volumes, all of which Luther wrote with a
quill pen, which goes to show that you do not need a lot of technology to do some very important work in this world.

So, Luther was a professor, but also a preacher. His pastor, John Bugenhagen, often called upon him to preach there at St. Mary’s Church in Wittenberg, to help carry some of the pastoral load. That’s what Carol sent me a text message about. She had just seen the pulpit where Martin Luther preached 800 sermons.

Eight hundred sermons! That’s a lot of preaching. So I got to wondering how many sermons I have preached. And as I calculate things, I have probably preached that many sermons right here at Immanuel’s sacred desk. If I preach, say, fifty sermons a year, which I bet I do¹, and I multiply that by my twenty-two years now, I too have probably stepped up into Immanuél’s pulpit eight hundred times now.

Which means eight hundred chances to get things wrong and to lead souls astray! Which is all to set the stage for a topic that weighs heavily on the mind of all preachers. It is a topic that Luther cared deeply about and it is a topic brought to the fore by today’s Gospel Lesson. The sorrowful topic is the possibility of false shepherds and pseudo gospel and preachers whose ministry amounts to the ruination of souls. To use the words of Jesus in our text, they are “thieves and robbers,” and they come “only to steal and kill and destroy.”

God forbid that any preacher should actually desire to do that! I am sure that we do not. The holy office of word and sacrament is meant to draw people to Jesus and to save souls and work for good lives dedicated to Jesus during these threescore and ten years granted to us. It is hard to imagine a pastor who would deliberately lead his flock astray.

Still, Martin Luther believed that there were plenty of false shepherds in his day. He said that it was with him and his people as it was back in the days of Saint Paul, who with sorrow in his words warned the church leaders in Ephesus that false shepherds would try to come among them:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; (Acts 20:29, RSV)²

Again, if there are any fierce wolves devouring the flock, I am sure we do not mean to do that. My conviction is a simple one: I believe that the way for any preacher to avoid being a false shepherd is to preach Jesus straight and true. I am a conservative Lutheran pastor, but it is not a matter of temperament or politics, but is simply an earnest attempt to teach and preach Jesus as the church has long

¹ Taking into account the Sunday sermons, plus sermons on The Name of Jesus, Ash Wednesday, midweek Lent sermons, Holy Week sermons, Monday Morning sermons, Thanksgiving Eve, Christmas Eve, and Christmas morning.
² Martin Luther, The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Volume 2 (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000), page 383.
preached him. I want the company of the apostles, the saints, the fathers and mothers of the church. I want to stand shoulder to shoulder with them. To do that, I cling to the Bible and to the Church’s traditional understanding of the Bible. I am not creative, nor do I want to be when it comes to the faith of the church, for I fear the possibility of which Jesus spoke:

\[9\]But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines \textit{the commandments of men}. (Matthew 15:9, KJV)

It’s a modest thing to claim — something which every single pastor on the face of this earth would claim too. But let me simply put it into words: I want to present Jesus to you. He is your true Good Shepherd. I do not want to preach for doctrine “the commandments of men.” I try to preach Jesus as I find him in the Bible. I do not want it to be said of me that it would have been better that a millstone were hanged about my neck and that I was drowned in the depths of the sea (Matthew 18:6). I do not want that. Instead I want to share eternal beatitude with you and with Jesus. And so I ask for your prayers and your prayers for all preachers.

So, that’s the first part of this sermon. It reflects the first emphasis of our text: that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life of the church. He is the true shepherd of the flock. I do not want to be a thief or a robber and so I try to preach Jesus fair and square, along the same lines the church has been preaching Jesus since the days of the apostles.

\textbf{What a Good Shepherd!}

The second half of this sermon is the more fun half. It is about what a wonderful Shepherd we have! I mean Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and hard at work as our good Shepherd in life.

Let’s begin with a charming paragraph from one of Luther’s sermons on our text. Luther has been developing the theme that all of the sheep in his fold have received the same grace. We have all received the same baptism, for example, and the same promise of forgiveness of sins in the Holy Communion. Now Luther says that in spite of each of receiving the same grace, still Jesus gives each of us individual attention and calls us to our own personal path following him:

…there is a difference when he begins to call by special names those who are in the same grace; as a shepherd has special marks for each sheep and calls one “Brownie,” another “Blackie,” or such names as he will. Likewise Christ produces special works in each individual when he comforts, admonishes, and helps him in his needs and cares, through his Word. Also he distributes to men [his people] his gifts: to one a stronger faith than to another, or more understanding; gifts to teach and explain the Scriptures, to preach, to rule. Again,
he uses an individual for a special work, to accomplish more and greater things than another; he visits one with much suffering and another with little; he extended the Gospel farther through Paul than through the other apostles; he called Peter and led him to suffer in a different way that he did John.  

I bet it is so that the shepherd gets to know his sheep so well that he has individual names for them, “Brownie,” “Blackie,” and so on. I once read about a peach orchard farmer that he knew every tree in his orchard. He had planted each one by hand, watched each one grow, knew each of its strengths and weaknesses. Likewise, when I was a boy picking huckleberries, I knew each bush in our huckleberry woods. My grandfather had introduced me to them one by one. It was our secret. No one else seemed to know about that huckleberry woods.

So it is with Jesus our Good Shepherd. He knows each of us individually and works with us according to a personal plan for us. And catch this: whatever the ups and downs of that plan, it is a plan for our everlasting good. The prophet Jeremiah expresses this them well:

11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11, NRSV)

The trick in life is to do the best we can for God and for our neighbor, and entrust everything else to the saving plan of our holy God. Let us never stray from Jesus and his ways, for that can only do us harm. Rather, as our Children’s Choir will soon sing for us, let us seek “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.”

It is true that we all share the same baptism and so the same grace of baptism, but it is also true that it is intrinsic to each baptism that it includes the name of the one being baptized. Jesus might call upon the church to go to the very ends of the earth, to make disciples and to baptize them, and yet, for each one of those baptisms, there is that one person’s name. It signifies that Jesus is calling that person into his church and into his discipleship. He is calling that individual person, with that person’s strengths and weakness, gifts and troubles, experience and things to be learned.

Likewise, in the Blessed Sacrament, it is intrinsic to the Sacrament that you approach me one by one, and I distributed the holy elements to you one by one. My hand presses into your hand as I give you the Body of our Lord or lay the host on your tongue, and the assisting minister lifts the cup to your lips, one by one. We should view this one-by-one feature of the Blessed Sacrament as Jesus looking

at you, each one, right in the eyes and saying, “I give my body and my blood for you.”  

And so it is in the Holy Communion as Jesus says in today’s text:

3To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (John 10:3, RSV)

There are mysteries here, to be sure. Why in the world, for example, do some Christians seem to have an easier time of it than others? Why do some Christians struggle with depression or poverty, or sickness in their children or spouse? Why does Jesus seem to go easier on some than others? We cannot know the complete answer to this till heaven comes. For one things, we do not really know the secret and hidden sorrows and sufferings of others. To us, their lives might look easy, but to them, they are struggling with all their might simply to stay afloat. Also, perhaps the ones who have it easier are those who in various ways are weaker than the others. The Bible promises that our Lord will not lay upon us more than we can bear, and so if we must bear a lot, that might well signify that the Lord knows us to be strong, and makes use of our strength in ways that are hard for us, but which one day will be shown to be great blessings for the world. But these things are just guesses. The one thing we can be sure of is that the path that Jesus lays before us is a path that he attends to individually and personally, to make sure that our life turns out well in the end and is a good life along the way.

Plus, we know this: Jesus has come that we might have life and have it more abundantly. What a precious saying that is! You have heard me repeat that verse from today’s Gospel Lesson many times over the years:

10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10, RSV)

To take two of Luther’s examples, Jesus might well have accomplished more with Saint Paul than he did with the other apostles, and Jesus might well have caused St. Peter to suffer in ways different from St. John, but to each of them he came that they might have life and have it abundantly. Their lives, each one, would have been poorer if they had strayed away from their Good Shepherd.

This text about abundant life pairs up with another of our Lord’s famous sayings. It is the one about taking up our cross:

24Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. 25For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and
whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.
(Matthew 16:24-25, KJV)

It is a strange combination of ideas: that Jesus should both bid us to take up our cross and promise that he comes to give us abundant life — an instrument of death paired with a promise of abundant life. But it is a combination I believe in with all my heart and commend to you: Whatever it takes that you might be true to Jesus, even if it should be a cross, accept it, for Jesus is bringing abundant life to you.

I am fully persuaded that this is so for you and me. Jesus has baptized us one by one. He nourishes us at his holy Table one by one. And he works with us out in the world one by one. It can only harm us to stray from him, and it can only make life richer for us to draw near to him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.