

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

This is Good Shepherd Sunday and, boy, if there was ever a time when any of us felt like we needed a Good Shepard, it's now. I think most of us are struggling with being at home, with worrying about work, with worrying about relatives, with worrying about our own health, with worrying about the economy, with worrying about groceries, with worrying about all kinds of aspects of our life that has been up-ended.

And this morning in the gospel of John we listen to John have Jesus explain to us about the Good Shepherd. You have to remember that John is the gospel in which Jesus explains who he is in a number of different ways. "I am" sentences link him directly to God and God's explaining to Moses that God's name is, "I am." So Jesus said, I am the vine. And you are the branches. And Jesus said, I am the light of the world. And Jesus said, I am the true bread. And in this particular passage that we heard this morning Jesus says I am the good shepherd. I am the gate keeper, and I am the gate. There are a number of mixed metaphors here, all of which give us a little bit of insight into what Jesus is telling us about who he is. Jesus is the one who cares for us. Jesus is the one who takes care of us. Jesus is the one who calls us by name. And he says, I have come that they might have a life and have it abundantly. So, what does that mean to us to have life abundantly?

When I was pretty young I thought abundant life had to do with driving the newest and fanciest car; having the most prestigious wardrobe; having plenty of money in the bank; having a big stock portfolio and a beautiful house and all of that was the abundant life. And all those things are nice and many of us work for all of those things and are happy when we get them. But that's not what Jesus means by abundant life. As I got a little older, I began to understand that relationships are actually more important than physical things. Our family relationships, our friendships, our relationships with our neighbors. All of our human connections, be they at the inside circle or if they're the next circle out or if they're even further. It's our human contact. We are made to be in relationship with each other. We are social animals, as it were. So this pandemic has been particularly hard on us as a species, not just physically, and not just medically, but it has been hard on us, psychologically. We are used to physical connection. We are used to physical contact. We are used to being in groups. We are used to being in conversation. All of this is beyond anything we might have imagined.

But this morning Jesus reminds us that he is the Good Shepherd and he is going to lead us to green pastures and he knows what our needs are even when we don't. So right now, we may not feel like we are enjoying abundant life, but then again we might. Think about how much our lives have changed in the last few weeks. Think about how intentional we have to be right now about being connected with other people. We don't just bump into people and stop and chat. We have to do that intentionally. We think about specific people more often. We reach out to specific people more often. We think about the people in our lives who are the most important to us. That's what Jesus meant when he said, I came to bring them abundant life that they might live more abundantly. So we get to define what abundant life is.

And as I got even older, knowing that relationships were a source of great wealth for all of us, I began to understand what Jesus meant by abundant life. And he showed us that in the life that he lived. And he showed us that in the life that he gave, not only on a daily basis while he walked the earth, but ultimately, at the time of his crucifixion when he gave up his life in this world in order to provide us with eternal life. But during his ministry he showed us what it meant to spend our lives, giving to other people; to give up our lives in service to others which is very much what we are doing right now in terms of following the rules of this pandemic. Those of us who are willing to stay away from our friends...to stay away from our families...to stay away from gathering places, we are spending our lives, giving that up in service to other people, even other people that we don't know.

We are spending our lives the way Jesus spent his life. And there is no greater fulfillment, than to know that you have spent your life in service to somebody else or something else. Think about the times in your life when you have given up something you wanted so that somebody else could have something that they desperately need. The emotional impact of that on the giver is something that is not really talked about very often. But that's abundant life...when we give up things that we want because somebody else needs what we have. And most of us, myself included, are a little resistant to doing that. I'm not nearly as generous as I think I should be with my time or with my resources, but whenever I do give way to that impulse to share...whenever I do give way to that impulse to take care of somebody else, I find it far more rewarding and far more satisfying and far more life giving than I would ever have imagined. And so I keep having to remind myself, spending my life in service to other people is what provides me with real living. It provides all of us with abundant life and I'm sure you have found this out yourselves. I know so many of you who are incredibly generous with your time, with your expertise, and with your resources in service to other people. And I know that you are living abundant lives in ways that you probably never imagined when you were young. That's what makes this particular Bible passage so relevant right now. If you think about it, in many ways, we are currently living an abundant life that just feels very different than what we are accustomed to thinking about in terms of abundant life. There is more time for stillness.

There is more time for contemplation. There is more time to be aware of God. There is more time to be aware of what we miss. I miss Holy Eucharist something terrible. And I expect you do, too. And I can't wait until we can do that again, together. But longing for something... missing something...brings it into focus for us, so that we know that that's a part of our abundant life...things that we miss right now. But part of our abundant life is also the things that we are getting right now: perhaps more sleep, perhaps, a slower pace of life, a realization of what's truly important to us, a thanksgiving for the things that we do have that take care of our daily and our physical needs.

Nothing else could have provided us with his insight about abundant life like COVID-19 has. As wretched as it is and as evil as it is and as frightening as it is, it has required us to live in a different way. When we get back to normal, we may decide that the normal way remember is not the normal that we want in a new life. We may remember that the normal that we experienced when we were in quarantine had some really life giving aspects to it. And we need to remember that when we reconstruct not only our personal lives, but our lives together as the body of Christ. We ask you all to join us in searching your own hearts and searching your own life and assessing the abundant life that Jesus has provided for us. And we ask that Jesus continues to provide for us and we give our gratitude to Jesus...that he is, in fact, the Good Shepherd and he is, in fact, caring for us right now.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.