



“Lenses of Abundance”

Texts: Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18

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I was at a pastors conference this past week. I love these conferences that are just for pastors because often I run into someone I know, but always there is a camaraderie of knowing what life is like for the other person - the joys and challenges that come from being in the same profession.

One friend from the past spoke about the inability to quantify one’s life’s work. I always thought that that must be easier to do when one is an installed pastor and at one location for many years; being able to see people through life stages would help to see how their faith had grown and how they were able to respond to life’s challenges. But in talking to pastors who had spent decades at churches, they still faced the question that so many of us ask: Am I making a difference with how I’m living out my life, and if so, how? When it is all said and done, will it show that my life mattered? That in the grand scheme of things, did I help make a difference for the better? And while it is always nice to have other people say yes, you did make a difference in my life, which is a part of it, we also want to be able to say yes for ourselves, which doesn’t seem quite as easy.

Ours is a busy society. People are always doing, always on the go. Is this our way of trying to show that our life does matter and that we make a difference? Or is it a way of keeping busy to stop us from reflecting on what the meaning of our own lives mean to us and to God?

Regardless of when or how those questions come up, I think they are grounded in a deep longing and desire to live a meaningful and faithful life - to live an abundant life in Christ. Because that is what we are told is why Christ came to us in the first place. Jesus says, “ I came that they (which is you and me) may have life and have it abundantly.” That last sentence, which I quoted, is the verse that precedes the reading we heard this morning from John. It is all part of this Good Shepherd discourse. The first half of this discourse, John 10:1-10. In the first half, Jesus is telling them how the thief will come at

night to try and lead them astray, but that the sheep know his voice and will follow the Master's voice. And, that the purpose of my coming, he says, was so that you will not be led astray, but that by following my voice you can have this abundant life.

So I want us to start by looking at this idea of the abundant life. What does an abundant life even mean? I think that abundance is that quality of life that lets us touch the deepest part of ourselves. It connects us with the divine, with the holy, and with what is good, true, and beautiful in this world. It's not so much about getting what we don't have, but living more fully into what is already present. So, that abundance is love that leads to love. It's joy that leads to joy. It's peace that leads to peace. It's kindness that leads to kindness. It's stepping more deeply and more fully into our own life and into the life of another. It never adds to the pain of the world. Abundance is Jesus' way of being in this world. It is the presence of God lived through your life and my life.

So I'd like to look at the four images found in our story today - the shepherd, the sheep, the hired hand, and the wolf - and consider them through the lenses through which to see abundance and abundant life.

Of course when we think of the Good Shepherd we immediately think of Jesus. We are told repeatedly that He is the Good Shepherd, but have you ever thought about what I told the children in the children's message? That we take on the character and nature of Jesus when we allow the Holy Spirit to work through us and so, in the process, people become the Good Shepherd? When you look back over your life, are you able to think of people who have been Good Shepherds to you? Who have guided you in your life? Who have offered words of wisdom that you needed to hear? That you were able to hear God speak to you through the words they offered up to you?

I don't ask these questions to take away from Jesus, but to expand, enlarge, and extend his presence. Think about what Psalm 23 says about the shepherd, What does the shepherd do? The shepherd leads and guides. The shepherd revives. The shepherd protects. The shepherd companions. The shepherd nourishes and feeds. And this next one is one that really hits home for me. The Shepherd sets a table of welcome and hospitality, a table that nourishes and builds us up, in the presence of our enemies. It is the table that reminds us that whatever hostilities are raging around us, whether it be personal issues of marital problems or challenges with children or the impact of the chaos in our society and within our political parties, we can find quiet and peace and be nourished and built up by eating at the table that God has prepared. It is the reason why we gather around the communion table each month. God prepared a table for us even in the presence of our enemies. We don't fear because that calm, welcoming table is already set.

Before the conference, I took a bit of vacation time and went home to NJ and visited with several of the friends who nourish my soul - my Jewish friends with whom I stay who shower me with warmth and hospitality, my retired pastor friend who has been mentor and guide for many years now, another close friend who was an administrator at Princeton when I was there who has always offered me love and laughs, wise counsel, and supportive friendship. And finally, a childhood friend with whom I have gone

through life's joys and challenges with. Meeting at age 6, we have gone through life's joys together of marriage and children, of life's sorrows with the trauma of divorce, her parents and my marriage, and the joys and challenges of parenting children. They are my shepherds who always prepare a place for me in the challenges and traumas of my life. They always prepare a table laden with grace and love and acceptance and some caramel cashew ice cream for dessert. I hear God speak to me through our conversations and their words of encouragement. I'm sure they don't even begin to understand just how much God has used them to hear God's voice and to guide and love on me. These are the main shepherds God has put in my life. Can you think of the people who have or are shepherding you in your life? Or can you see how God is or has used you to shepherd others. That one is often harder to see, as indicated by the pastors at the conference reflecting on what difference their lives made in service and ministry.

One last word on abundance. These shepherds in our lives, whether they know it or not, are always leading us to abundance. The good shepherd is always leading to the green pastures, to the still waters, to the table set and the cup overflowing. God is always about helping us to get to that place of abundance. It's always there, but sometimes we just need someone to help us to see it, to remind us of what matters most.

Of course we are always sheep in relation to God, but maybe we need to think of some other things that are sheep and what we do with those sheep in our lives. I'm talking about thinking of sheep as your parenting or grand parenting, your loving, your friendships, your marriage, your teaching, your hopes and dreams, your losses, your sorrows, your fears. We've all got them. We've all entrusted those things into the hands and the life of another. And we've also been entrusted with those things by another. You share your life with others, whether good or bad. You're the sheep seeking the guidance of the shepherd. Or someone comes to you and says, "You know, I'm really struggling in my marriage. Can I tell you what's going on?" They're sheep asking for your shepherd guidance.

There's something about sheep that is abundant. It's in their vulnerability, their honesty, and the way they hope. They are full and whole and life giving. It's why they matter, why we care for them. It's why we receive that entrustment with great respect and honor.

Jesus contrasts the shepherd with the hired hand. The hired hand does not own the sheep and does not care really if the sheep live or die. When the wolf comes, he runs away. When it gets too difficult, too scary, too risky, the hired hand takes off in the other direction.

The hired hand lives by transaction and not abundance. And probably every one of you could tell a story about a hired hand in your life, someone who, when you most needed them, ran out on you and left you. Who have been the hired hands in your life?

But even more painfully, we must ask, who have we been hired hands to? Who has needed our help, our time, our love and attention, our faith, and we have run out on them? Hired hands stay only as long as the wages are good. The hired hand either refuses to see or can't see the abundance that's already there. She or he trades abundance for wages. In what ways have you experienced the hired hand in your life?

Finally, there is the wolf. Wolves snatch and scatter. Wolves devour life. They destroy abundance. They carry it away. Wolves come in all shapes and sizes in our world today. Sometimes wolves are busyness or achievement, or our need for approval. It may be the wolf of having to be right or in control that is taking our abundance. And sometimes the wolf is fear, or anger, or resentment. Perhaps it is the wolf of failure, despair, or brokenness. These wolves are all out to destroy our abundance.

What wolves are you dealing with in your life today? How have they snatched and scattered your abundance or the abundance of another?

It is pretty easy to see the good shepherd and the sheep as images of abundance. They point to what is good. But what about the hired hand and wolf? That's more difficult, but they also point to abundance but in different ways. They point to what is not there. they remind us of what's been lost, what's been carried away. Abandoned. It is not as if the abundance was never there or can never be regained again. It's just gotten lost, scattered, forgotten.

Every one of us could tell a story when we were the good shepherd and we guided and we protected and we nourished. and we could tell a story of how ten minutes later, we were the hired hand and we ran out. We could talk about the sheep that matter to us and are so vulnerable, ourselves included, and we could tell the stories of the wolves that devour, snatch, and scatter.

We could divide people into good guys and bad guys, but the fact is that we are both and we've been both to others. Let us hear this story as information about our lives, not to pat ourselves on the back when we've been shepherds or to chastise ourselves when we've been the hired hand or even the wolf, but to simply reflect and be open to the abundant life that has been provided to us through the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

"I have come," Jesus says, "that they may have life and have it more abundantly." It's his starting point and it's his goal. Abundant life is Jesus' promise to each of us. Alleluia. Amen.

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