

4th Sunday of Easter/Good Shepherd Sunday A 30 April 2023

John 10:1-21

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Good Shepherd, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus says]: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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.' Let's pray: ...

All people struggle with questions about the validity of their life. I think those questions lie behind much of our busyness and anxiety. Do our lives matter? Do we make a difference? We strive to prove ourselves, accumulate stuff, achieve, to prove that our lives matter and make a difference. And when we're older, we tend to look back on our lives, and assess what we've done and whether we've made a difference in this world.

I don't know how many times I've heard frail people say, "I'm just ready to go. I don't want to be here. I don't understand what God is doing. Why am I still here?" The unspoken lament is, "I'm just a burden."

This is grounded in a deep longing and desire for abundance in our life. We want to live an abundant life.

Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." That sets the tone for his telling of today's story about the good shepherd. And the hired hand, the sheep, and the wolf are instrumental in building a picture of abundant life. So, let's consider all four images in relation to abundance.

Abundance

How many times have you heard of people exhausting their time and effort working for something they've really wanted and got it, only to find that it didn't do what they thought it would? It didn't fulfill them. It left them unsatisfied. They got what they wanted but lacked abundance.

Abundance isn't about quantity. It's a quality of life that connects us with the divine, with the holy, and with what's good, true, and beautiful in this world. 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 others. It never adds to the pain of the world. Abundance is Jesus' way of being in this world. It's the presence of God lived through your life and my life.

So, let's explore these four images in today's gospel; the good shepherd, the sheep, the hired hand, and the wolf, and consider how they might open windows to the abundant life.

The Good Shepherd

Who's the good shepherd? Jesus. Correct. Now, how does that relate to us? Could we be good shepherds too? Have others been good shepherds in your life?

I don't wish to take anything away from Jesus, *the* Good Shepherd; rather, to expand and extend his presence. Think about what Psalm 23 says. The shepherd leads and guides. The shepherd revives. The shepherd protects. The shepherd accompanies. The shepherd nourishes and feeds. The shepherd sets a table of welcome and hospitality in the difficult places of life.

Have you experienced that in your life? Have you ever had someone guide you? Has anyone fed and nourished your soul? Have you ever had someone walk with you through the valley of the shadow of death? Were they not good shepherds to you? Have you ever had someone say or do just the right thing and he or she revived your soul when you just couldn't lift yourself?

Maybe you've done those things for someone else? It happens when we parent. It happens when we love our spouse. It happens when we care for someone who's sick or dying. It happens when we patiently listen to others.

My point is, the shepherd is someone who leads us to the abundance that's always been right before us. Sometimes we just need a guiding hand to show us that it already exists, and to remind us of what really matters most.

Sheep

So, who are the sheep? Us, yes. Jesus is the good shepherd. He leads, we follow. That's how it's supposed to work. But again, I want to extend the image to explore another window to abundance in your life. What if the sheep are the things that really matter, the things that have ultimate value? What if the sheep are the things entrusted to us and that we entrust to others?

Think about sheep in relation to your parenting or your grandparenting, your loving, your friendships, your marriage, your hopes, your dreams, your losses, your sorrows, your fears. We've all got them. We've all entrusted those things into the hands of others. And we've also been entrusted with those things by others. 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 a sheep asking for your shepherd guidance. Or you go to someone and say, "The world's going crazy, I want to get off. I really need some encouragement; some hope." You are the sheep looking for a shepherd.

There's something about sheep that's abundant. Their vulnerability and their honesty entices us to care for them, and their entrustment comes with great respect and honour. Vulnerability, honesty, respect, and honour are all valuable qualities of abundance.

Hired Hand

Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the hired hand. The hired hand doesn't own or care for the sheep. For the good shepherd, the sheep are the goal and the reason for everything the shepherd does. For the hired hand, they're just the means. The hired hand punches the clock and shows up to receive wages and when the shift is over, they take off. And if it gets too difficult, too risky, too "wolfy", the hired hand shoots through.

The hired hand lives by quantity not abundance. The painful question for us is: When have we been the hired hand to someone else, and we shot through when they really needed us? 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. They trade abundance for wages.

Wolf

And there's the wolf. Wolves, Jesus says, snatch and scatter. Wolves devour life. They destroy and carry off abundance. Wolves come in all sorts of shapes and

sizes in our world. Sometimes it's the wolf of busyness, the wolf of achievement, the wolf of needing approval, or the wolf of having to be right and in control. Sometimes it's the wolf of fear, or the wolf of anger and resentment. Or maybe it's the wolf of failure, the wolf of despair, the wolf of brokenness. I'm sure we're all aware of wolves who've snatched and scattered abundance.

A Picture of Abundance

Jesus uses these four images to paint a picture of abundance in our life. If we look through these images and not just at them, they all point to the abundant life Jesus is offering us.

It's pretty easy to see the good shepherd and the sheep as images of abundance. But what about the hired hand and the wolf? They're more difficult and yet, they also point to abundance. They point to what's not there. They remind us of what's been abandoned and scattered. They point to abundance that can be regained.

So, what do you see when you look through these windows on your life? There isn't one right answer. We must each work it out in our own lives. That becomes even clearer when we locate today's gospel in the sequence of other stories. Sometimes it's insightful to look at where the gospel story falls in relation to what comes before and after.

Immediately before this gospel, Jesus heals the man who was born blind at birth. He opens his eyes to a new seeing, new vision, new insight. Next, Jesus tells the good shepherd story. Then the next big story is the raising of Lazarus. Do you see the pattern? Restored sight, the good shepherd, new life.

Brought together, we see Jesus gently guiding us through a process of opening our eyes to see the new life that he is bringing us, the abundant life he offers.

It's easy to divide today's gospel into good characters and bad characters. Instead, let's examine our lives in light of each image, without making judgements or conclusions, and identify the openings to abundant life that each unlocks. "I have come," Jesus says, "that they may have life and have it abundantly." Abundant life is Jesus' promise to each of us, Saints, so let's grasp every opportunity we're offered. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.