

Easter 4

May 3, 2020

Rev. Timothy C. Linstrom

Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit, Lincolnshire, Illinois

As I was considering our text for this Sunday and the emphasis on Jesus as the Good Shepherd, I couldn't help but identify with the sheep under the Master's care. And as we have all been like sheep, kept in our pens these last weeks, as we follow these stay-at-home orders to prevent the spread of COVID-19, we've all been looking for a Shepherd who can provide all the answers, one who can manufacture a cure or a solution, and get us out of the ongoing dilemma, we've have been wrestling with.

So we could use a Shepherd, but not just any Shepherd. Psalm 146 reminds us, "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God."

Our Lord Jesus is the Shepherd we're looking for, and in our text for today he says "I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

Jesus says that he has come so that his sheep, his followers, all of us, may have life and have it abundantly. Now life itself, is obviously good, desirable, important. How much more so, then, is abundant life. The chance to not just simply live, but to thrive, to not simply exist, but to flourish.

To have a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment; to know and be known, to accept and be accepted. And I believe we all want that as much as anything in our lives, and I believe that we regularly make all kinds of sacrifices in the hope of earning or achieving that sense of fulfillment.

And who would know how to take advantage of that drive better, than those who want to sell us something. Advertisers must stay in tune with what people want and how to attract our attention to what they're selling. So they change with our culture. Perhaps you've noticed the changing nature of advertising over the last 10 years or so, because there has been a shift in advertising from making promises about brand quality to promises about quality of life.

It used to be when you saw an advertisement or a commercial, you immediately knew what the product was that was being sold and learned of some qualities as to why this was supposedly the best in the market, and why you should want to buy it. But now I can't even count the number of times I've watched a commercial and had no idea what company was represented and what they were selling. A beautiful scene, some people

enjoying each other's company, a confident or provocative look, images that represent the abundant life, and we're left to figure out the rest.

Advertisers are keenly aware of how we seek a sense of purpose and fulfillment from things we buy and they try to exploit that. And yet having an awesome car, a great laptop, a pair of running shoes, can't provide the abundant life of meaning and purpose we seek.

I would encourage you to take an honest look at some of the choices you've made in order to live the abundant life, because we've all made them. Consider some of the strategies you have employed, the things you have relied upon to bring you the authentic, abundant life that we all desire, and ask yourself whether or not you are satisfied. Because the fact of the matter is that after all our seeking and searching and shopping, we still end up far short of experiencing the abundant life Jesus promises.

The abundant life that Jesus describes flows from our relationship with Jesus and through him with God. But to be in relationship requires us to be more vulnerable than we're most often prepared to be. So much of our life is about protecting ourselves: giving the impression that we really have it all together and in that way guarding ourselves against vulnerability. The difficulty, though, is that we cannot experience abundant life without exposing, even lifting up, those very vulnerabilities we want to hide. For the truth of the matter is, as Brene Brown has said in her book "The Gifts of Imperfection", we cannot go selectively numb.

And in trying to protect ourselves from hurt and disappointment we have so numbed ourselves that we have cut ourselves off from the opportunity to really feel alive.

Think about it: so much of our life is caught up in this double-bind of wanting intimacy and honesty in relationships - with each other as much as with God - and yet simultaneously holding back, not risking exposing ourselves fully to others for fear they may reject us. It's a legitimate fear, of course, because people have rejected us in the past. And so we ensconce ourselves in emotional armor, living half-truths and sometimes outright lies about who we are, hoping to protect ourselves from hurt, perhaps all the while knowing that as long as we are not honest about who we are, we cannot trust the love and acceptance others would offer us. After all, would they really accept us, if they really knew us?

And because many have had the same experiences in church where we may have been excluded, overlooked, or been victims of gossip and backbiting, can we trust that God's going to have our back? Can we trust in a Good Shepherd?

It is this very real human condition and dilemma that God embraces in the incarnation, for God took on our lot and our life in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

Jesus, born of a woman, born under the law, experienced all that we experience, love and laughter, sorrow and disappointment. The teacher of love and peace was executed on a cross – this one knows the deepest recesses of our fears and insecurities and has embraced them all. And when he is resurrected, he comes bearing the peace he has offered all along, accompanied with the promise that his love is greater than fear and that his new life is greater than death.

Abundant life is not something to earn or achieve, buy or barter for. It is a gift, the sheer gift of a God who loves us enough to lay down his life for us. And so Jesus comes to us as the gatekeeper and good shepherd, the one who know his sheep by name so that we may receive and believe the wonderful truth about God's great and victorious love for us. This is the abundant life Jesus speaks of, and from it, comes a deep sense of meaning, purpose and fulfillment.

There's a wonderful story of a young man, named Randy, only 14 years old who was introduced to church through a friend. But then his family moved 20 minutes away, so each Sunday he made his own arrangements to get to church but he didn't have a way back home until later in the day, so when he wasn't with his friend, a family that lived near the church graciously invited him to their house almost every Sunday for a great meal. The family was Italian, so it was usually pasta and salad.

The father was an independent grocer who loved to share his many tales of buying and selling produce that simply captured the Randy's attention.

At dinnertime all would gather around the table, and the father would say "grace", which was a new experience for Randy. He watched as this successful man would bow his head and sincerely and humbly thank God for providing the food they were about to eat. Randy had never heard of such a thing. It seemed to him that he had worked very hard to get where he was and that he should take all the credit. But, he humbled himself in the presence of his family and declared his gratitude to God. There were times when everyone else's heads were bowed and eyes were closed, and Randy would look up and stare at him. His relationship with God was visible for all to see and all Randy desperately wanted was to grow up and be like him. He wanted to raise a family and demonstrate God's love and protection for his family, just as this father did.

Sometimes it's just these simple acts of trust and devotion that help build our relationship with God and with one another.

The very first Christian community began that way as our passage from the book of Acts so beautifully describes. They are devoted to the teachings and to fellowship.

They are doing theology, they are living together, they are eating together, they are praying together –

The new Christians are literally giving everything away for the community so that no one will be hungry or homeless and doing all in awe of the glory of God, with gladness and joy – and the community keeps growing every day. The story of the beginning of the Christian church is just glorious, for the church is alive, the church is on the move, the church is united in Christ.

Living under the care of the Good Shepherd is like that, for Jesus came that we may have life, and have it abundantly. Amen.