

“Abundant Life”
A Sermon Delivered
at
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by
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John 10: 1 – 10 & Psalm 23

This is an incredibly confusing text, at least in the details! John wrote this between 90 – 100 CE. It was written into the midst of an increasingly diverse church. Urban people, rural people, people of different races, people of poverty and people of wealth, Jews and Pagans. A time not unlike our own. It can be hard to find an image that will work for everyone.

Have you ever received one of those email forwards that lists the things that are unknown to a 25 year old? The gas lines of the 1970ties for example! Seems like yesterday to me. And yet I can remember growing up with people talking to me about D-Day. I understood the historical event but not the passion, fear and hope that forged the courage of that day.

It can be hard to find an image that will work for a diverse group of people. The author of John’s Gospel was looking back over Jesus’ teachings and seeking an image that would speak to the circumstances of his day.

A sheepfold was generally a stone pen in the midst of a pasture. It was a place where the shepherd would gather his sheep so that they would be safe from marauding predators. Either animal or human!

The problem is that John didn’t tell the story very well! At one point he has Jesus as the shepherd and at another he has Jesus as the gate. If we struggle to make all the details line up the result will be frustration. But the details are not the point.

The point is that Jesus calls his people to gather in the safety of his grace. It is the same theme that I began with on Easter Sunday. Jesus calls us by name. Name by precious name and he calls us to gather. That’s what church is all about. It is a gathering of those Jesus has invited—those called by name.

In today’s text the image of the shepherd and his sheep is particularly useful. The sheep are not the smartest creatures in creation but one thing is clear. They know the sound of their shepherd’s voice. The challenge is to get them to listen. To keep them from being distracted.

I hate to admit it but that’s a pretty good image! We know our Lord’s voice if we can find a quiet spot in our soul with which to listen.

But the thief is always there. The cell phone is always ringing, the “to do” list is always calling, and then there is work! Ah yes! Work—that noble duty of every good protestant—a duty that is so pervasive and so seductive that I suspect that I could name you at least a half dozen members of this church who have worked all week long and are in fact working this Sabbath morning.

I’m not declaring such people sinners! After all, I remember when I told my then young son about how important it was to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest and he immediately suggested that I might try it myself.

The point of the text is simply that Jesus calls to us and if we can push back the distractions then we will hear him.

HE RECOGNIZES US. CAN WE PAY SUFFICIENT ATTENTION TO RECOGNIZE HIM?

The challenge I always encounter at this point is the question, how can we tell the difference between the voice of the good shepherd and the voice of the thief and the bandit that John speaks of?

It’s not as easy as a sheep knowing his shepherd’s voice, or at least not quite.

According to John, the Good Shepherd is calling us to GRACE, RECOGNITION AND LIFE.

On the other hand the bandit is calling us to CORRUPTION, DESTRUCTION AND DEATH.

Now there just has to be more to this than that!

I mean, why wouldn’t everyone simply choose life and be happy forever and ever?

Oh that it could be that simple!

Jesus recognizes us and calls to us. That is grace.

Our first challenge is to return the favor and recognize Him and that’s sometimes difficult.

I sat in a meeting the other night where a group of high school students were trying to plan a fund raising event to help their favorite charity. We had gathered because the cause was good and worthwhile. But the bandit was alive and well in that room. There is a real difference between being realistic and being a bandit. The bandit steals the ideals, the bandit corrupts the grace, the bandit kills the hopes. If I were to try to recognize the savior in the midst of that meeting then the first thing I would have to do is try to get around the bandit. That night the bandit was in the disguise of a realist who proclaimed that the good and right couldn’t be done—would never prevail. That night death won.

It's true in our homes, in our places of labor and leisure, it's true in our city and yes it can even be true in the midst of our church. The largest obstacle between our lives and our recognition of our Lord is the bandit that works around us and through us.

Jesus recognizes us and calls to us.

How can we recognize Jesus in the midst of the lives we live?

Even if we think we can find Christ here in his church...

I mean we can't just stay in church all the time any more than the sheep can stay in the sheepfold all the time.

Just think about the image of the sheepfold. Jesus calls his sheep to gather there in the protection of his grace, but there is no grass in the sheepfold! **THE SHEEP CAN'T LIVE THERE ANYMORE THAN WE CAN LIVE HERE.**

He recognizes us.

We recognize him.

He calls us together.

Then what?

The last verse of today's text from John is the answer to that question. If we can recognize Jesus not only within the safety of our "religious community" but also out there in the midst of the narcissists and the bandits, then perhaps we can hear his promise.

I came that 'you' may have life, and have it abundantly.

The bandit brings us corruption, destruction and death. The Gospel of restriction, alienation and fear.

The Good Shepherd brings us grace, faith and life. The Gospel of Abundance. The Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Many years ago I knew a commercial fisherman named Eddie. He was one of those good old puritan types who usually had a grim smile on his face and always could tell you what was wrong with the world, the fishing industry and his wife.

Eddie was not a church going sort. Not that he had anything particularly against it. It was just that Sunday morning was a good time to catch up on his sleep, repair a few traps, renew his acquaintance with his two chocolate Labs.

I got to know Eddie one winter when the fishing had turned awful and he found himself sitting around the house too much for his wife's taste. Myrna had raised their children, provided a good home and worked at the local hospital. She volunteered Eddie to help me at the church. A group of us were trying to fix the old bell up in the steeple.

The first day Eddie showed up he told us quite clearly why it couldn't be fixed. Then he pitched in and helped us get the bell back on a secure mounting bracket.

The second day he came and told us why we were wasting our time. Then he pitched in and helped get the pulleys lined up so, when we could afford one, a new bell rope could be installed.

The third day he came and brought the rope from his fishing supplies. Good, new inch and a quarter line that was all properly whipped on the ends and sized for the pulleys. (The fact that it was so strong that one could pull the whole church over with it was a point that we left unsaid.)

The salvation that God calls us to is not solitary.

We may here the voice of savior calling our name.

We may even push aside the bandits and the pundits and the politicians long enough to actually recognize the Good Shepherd's voice.

But friends, the sheepfold of God's grace is not a private room. Thank God it is a place where we stand shoulder to shoulder with others who are struggling to pay attention and find the way.

I let Eddie be the first person to pull that rope.

When the sound of that bell rang out for the first time in a decade, his face lit up with a grin from ear to ear.

It was as if he had found a whole new abundance in his life.

Amen