

John 10: 1-11

Olivet Church, Charlottesville, VA, May 7, 2017

“Abundant Life”

Our reading from John chapter 10 is part of a story that began in chapter 9 with Jesus’ healing of a blind man. John tells the good news about Jesus with the repeated pattern of a miracle performed by Jesus, followed by dialogue with those present, followed by an explanation by Jesus. Our reading today is from the explanation part.

Through generations the people of Israel had awaited the God-appointed true Shepherd in the lineage of King David, who himself was taken from guarding sheep to become the shepherd of Israel. Yet for generations God’s people had suffered under human rulers who, in the words of Jeremiah 23 “had scattered God’s flock, and not attended to them;” and in the words of Ezekiel 34 “had not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured, brought back the strayed, sought the lost; but with force and harshness had ruled them and scattered them.”

And then one day Jesus stood among the people of Israel and proclaimed, “I am the Good Shepherd. All who came before were thieves and bandits.” They used and abused the sheep for their advantage; they did not shepherd them that their lives might be secure, blessed, rich, and abundant. But “I am the good shepherd, I lay down my life for the sheep. I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly. They will follow me because they know my voice. I will call them by name and lead them.”

It remains a common practice in the Middle East for shepherds to use common sheepfolds to protect their flocks at night. And in the morning a shepherd will call and his sheep will recognize his voice, separate themselves from the other sheep, and follow him. The shepherd does not go behind the sheep driving them; but ahead of the sheep who follow behind him because they knew him, trust him, and depend upon him. And so at the appointed time in history the Good Shepherd came and began to call his sheep, and his sheep recognized his voice.

In the stories that follow in John’s gospel we find Jesus’ friend Lazarus dead and several days in the tomb when Jesus shows up and calls his name, “Lazarus.” And hearing his voice Lazarus was released from death and came out of the tomb. And on that first Easter, recounted in John chapter 20, we find a grieving , reeling from an encounter with angels at the empty tomb confusing Jesus with a gardener, when Jesus calls her name, “Mary!” And she knows his voice, is released from grief and despair, and wraps her arms around his legs screaming, “Rabouni”

In the Friday book group we are reading a book about the history of the early church and have learned that the early Christians believed that it was not so much the miracles and teachings of Jesus that testified to his divinity, as the fact that through him the Old Testament prophecies about the end-time conversion of the nations was being fulfilled. The fulfillment of the promise made in the very first call of God to Abraham, that “through him all of the families of the earth would be blessed” was being witnessed, as through the gospel people heard the voice of the true shepherd and came to him, followed him, and found life in him. From a small band of uneducated country bumpkins, the voice of the Good Shepherd was proclaimed such that in less

than three centuries people across the Roman Empire, and the Emperor himself, had recognized and responded to his voice.

And we are each here this morning because through people of faith, and churches, and life circumstances, and occasionally dramatic spiritual experiences we have heard Jesus calling our name, and we have followed him, and found life in his name. And we rejoice as a congregation and celebrate with those youth who will confirm or profess their faith and commit their lives to Jesus today; because in varied and sundry ways, they have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd, and have responded.

His voice can be distinguished from the voices of others, and from the Siren songs of distraction and destruction, because it is the voice of love. It is the voice of one who does not use or abuse, but blesses and gives life by offering up his own life.

In a book about his wife who died from cancer, a Boston Globe reporter told about the time she was helping with a summer camp for children with various developmental challenges. She had been drawn to a young girl name Elle, who despite her physical and mental challenges exhibited a radiant, joyful, loving spirit. While Elle was caught up in a game of duck-duck-goose, she noticed a note on the ground behind where Elle had been sitting. She picked it up and read the words “If we could have chosen from all of the children in the world, we would have chosen you Elle,” and realized it was a note from her parents. She handed the note to another adult volunteer saying, “Quick, read this, it’s the secret to life.”

“Read this,” John says in chapter 20, “it’s the secret to life.” I’ve “written these things about Jesus so that you may come to believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” You need to know how deeply loved and cared for you are by your heavenly Father; that for you he came, for you he suffered, for you he died, while calling your name; that hearing and responding to his voice you might have life, and have it abundantly.

It is an abundant life because we can live in peace, knowing how loved and valued we are, not needing to have our egos stroked, our needs met, have everything go our way.

It is an abundant life because we can live without undue fear and anxiety knowing that whatever wind and waves beat against us, our house is built on the rock foundation of the Creator of heaven and earth and Lord of history.

It is an abundant life because it is filled with meaning and purpose. In Paul’s words, we can “be steadfast and immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that our labor is not in vain” but is woven into the very fabric of God’s everlasting kingdom. What we do in the present is part of what is eternal, what has been planted among us and will come one day in all its fullness: the beauty, the justice, the peace, the joy, the restored creation and reclaimed humanity of the kingdom of God.

It is an abundant life because it is not constrained or diminished by our past. Increasingly, I look back on my life and recognize how many dumb, risky, foolish, self-serving things I have done.

But the expanding awareness of my sin only leads to a deepening embrace of and gratitude for God's grace.

It is an abundant life because of the growing trust in and closeness to the one who restores our souls, accompanies and comforts us in life's darkest valleys.

It is an abundant life because it is eternal. "Flesh and blood does not inherit the kingdom," Paul writes, "and the perishable does not put on imperishability." But through the death and resurrection of the Shepherd of our souls, death no longer makes a mockery of lives that are lived in faith, hope, and love. Death is no longer the grim reaper but simply the gardener, by which seeds that are perishable, weak, and mortal are raised up imperishable, glorious, and immortal.

And it is an abundant life because it is a glorified life. Our Christian hope is not in the paltry immortality of the soul or the meager restoration of what death seems to have destroyed. Rather it is a glorification into the fullness of life God intended for us all along such that the sufferings and limitations of the present no longer even come to mind. Preacher Tim Keller says that our future life compared to our life now will be something akin to the difference between our life now and that of a tomato. C.S. Lewis put it this way, "If we let him, he will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a...dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright, stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly God's own boundless power and delight and goodness."