

Year A Easter 4 Living Abundantly John 10 vv1 to 10

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” These words of Jesus sum up what he has just been trying to explain to his disciples and to the others listening to him. What does it mean to have not just life, but abundant life? To know the answer to this, we must also understand everything else Jesus has said today. This everything else is certainly not the easiest to grasp because Jesus talks in figures of speech rather than just saying things outright – he talks of shepherds and sheep, thieves and bandits, and even the gate for the sheep. Let’s explore these things so that we may know what is the abundant life Jesus tells us he came to give and, even more importantly, so that we may know if we are living that abundant life.

Jesus is often pictured, often thought of, as our Shepherd. Psalm 23 – one of the most well-known, well-loved psalms – tells us flat out that God is our Shepherd. The shepherd is the one who guides and protects the sheep. The sheep, we are told, know their shepherd’s voice and will respond to that voice and not to any others. This is actually a universal truth that we can say of any creature – we recognize the voice of those who care for us and we respond to those voices. I can remember, as a young girl, being dropped off at the door to the hair dresser while my mum parked the car. Even though I had my head in a sink at the back of the salon by the time she came in, I heard the familiar clearing of a throat out front and knew the comfort of my mum’s presence.

Interestingly, Jesus does not, in this passage, say he is the shepherd. We must figure out who are the shepherds and who is Jesus. It is important for you to know that the words we hear Jesus speak today come right after the story of his healing the man blind from birth. In that story, it is the religious leaders who refuse to see

the good in what Jesus has done. They focus only on the fact that he has healed on the sabbath and say, therefore, he cannot be from God. In the end, the lack of vision of the ones holding worldly power – a power they cling to – are the ones Jesus names as sinners, those turned from God's ways.

Just as sinners are those who do not follow God's ways, the thieves and bandits in today's story are those who do not follow the ways of a true shepherd. Thieves and bandits don't use the gate for the sheep, they sneak in over the walls. These are the bad shepherds – the ones who claim to lead the people but who are, in reality, more interested in personal gain than in doing good. Thieves – bad leaders – are only out to steal, to make a profit, Jesus tells us. They play the game according to the rules of the world – the one with the most, wins: the most property, prestige, money...the one holding power in the eyes of the world. There are plenty of leaders who fall into this category – leaders in government, in the church, in schools, in our communities. From domestic violence in the home to political leaders handing out contracts to friends: the news is full of people in power abusing their power because the world's power is alluring and this power corrupts.

There are good shepherds though. Continuously throughout scripture, we hear of God providing good leaders to guide and protect the people. Way back in Advent, we began our journey through this liturgical year with a description of the sort of leader that God provides for us. Isaiah tells us that the spirit of God will rest on this leader – the spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the desire to follow God's ways (see Is.11.1-10). Christians often only hear Jesus in this description but, in the beauty of God's word, there is a

richness of meaning and multiple interpretations. Isaiah speaks of Jesus the Messiah but not only Jesus the Messiah. God provides good leaders to lead God's people – leaders who follow God's ways and go in by the gate.

Jesus tells us today that he is the gate – the true way into God's guidance and protection. Those who follow God's ways – the way of life in God's kingdom – enter into that kingdom through Jesus...he is the way, the truth, and the life.

How so? Jesus shows to us life in God's kingdom. He shows us that this life is not simply following rules. Blindly following rules can lead to missing the point of the rules. Jesus makes this clear when he heals that blind man on the sabbath and lets his disciples pick grain on the sabbath. He demonstrates that "the rules", and following "the rules" means being aligned with God...loving God, neighbour, and creation with heart and mind. God set out rules to guide us in doing this.

Following the rules in order to be self-serving rather than self-giving is not the intent. So, healing on the sabbath is not a violation of the 'no work' on the sabbath rule. Allowing the hungry to eat is not a violation of the rule either but, rather, we are shown that following God's ways means being filled with love and compassion, means providing for the needs of others, even when doing these things means we lower ourselves as Jesus did the night he washed the feet of his betrayer and the ones who would desert him.

Jesus shows us that life following God's ways is a life fighting against the brokenness of this world, a fight to end inequality, injustice, intolerance – all of the things that nailed Jesus to the cross are the things we fight against when we pick up our cross and follow Jesus.

Jesus shows us that life following God's ways is a life of inclusion. Jesus tells his disciples and everyone listening to him, he has sheep that do not belong to this fold. He will bring them in also and they will listen to his voice, he says (John 10.16). The key to being a part of God's fold is to listen to Jesus' voice, that is, to follow the way of life in God's kingdom. Being in God's fold is not based on what sort of sheep you are and where you are from. The sheep who listen, who follow God's ways, are the sheep who enter the fold.

This life of love and compassion, of inclusion, of fighting against all brokenness is ours through Jesus because we follow him to the cross and into life in God's kingdom beyond through the mystery of baptism. In baptism we are clothed in Christ's righteousness and made a new creation, given the way into reconciliation with God, given life with God in God's kingdom despite the fact that we are still sinners. We continuously stray from God's ways – because, let's be honest, this is a difficult path to follow...always loving, always compassionate, washing the feet of people who will betray us, fighting against the world's brokenness when we are tangled up in the brokenness, it is difficult – but, God continuously welcomes us back whenever we return.

This life, Jesus tells us, this life that is so difficult for us to follow is abundant life. Perhaps this life doesn't sound very "abundant." We are accustomed to thinking of abundance as having lots of stuff regardless of what that stuff may be...an abundance of food is having lots of food of all kinds to eat. An abundance of shoes is having a shoe for every occasion and then some. Abundance is having plenty, perhaps more than we need – money, in particular – and we often don't feel like we have an abundance. However, an abundant life is not a life determined by the

“material goods we mark out as the signs and symbols of power and prosperity,” (p.5 of *Living Well and Dying Faithfully*). “To live a life that is full and abundant,” writes John Swinton, “is not to live a life that is void of suffering or that flees from the reality of death. Nor is it necessarily to live a life that is filled with material prosperity, as the abundant life of Jesus makes clear. Rather, life in all of its fullness relates to living our lives in ways that reveal our love for God, self, and one another in all things and at all times, including times of suffering and death. An absence of illness and disturbance may be desirable, but it is not definitive of abundant life” (p.6). Abundant life is to live a narrative of hope and joy that continues on even in the face of trouble or struggle. Abundant life is to live in the knowledge that God is drawing all things toward their perfection when there will be no trouble or struggle. Abundant life to be aware – and to act on the awareness – that we participate in this movement toward perfection through living the ways of God’s kingdom: living lives of love and compassion, self-giving, and the fight against brokenness. You see, Jesus came to give us life abundantly and we have the abundant life now.

It feels difficult because it is difficult – it is a life of ongoing transformation and it is a life contrary to mainstream culture. Our culture tells us such things as, when you drive a Buick, you will, “Enter ordinary. Exit extraordinary.” And women use Loreal makeup because we’re worth it. It is so important to always indulge ourselves with what we want in fact that, if your boyfriend doesn’t have Kraft peanut butter, leave him for a new boyfriend who does. And where will you get the money for the life you desire? Well, “don’t get mad, get e-trade.” Self-giving, sharing, caring for others, “not what I want but what you want”...these things we are called to as followers of God’s way and these things go against the grain – a

fact we can lose sight of because we exist in a community that does practice sharing and caring and self-giving founded on God's love. We will continue to live such lives more and more until such a life is the core essence of who we are because God is the core essence of who we are.

"Abundance," writes Michael K. Marsh, "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's good, true, and beautiful in this world. It's not so much about getting something we don't have, but living more fully into what is already present. [...] 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 [lives of others]. It never adds to the pain of the world. Abundance is Jesus' way of being in this world. [Abundant life does not mean easy, comfortable life but it does mean having the deep joy and peace of life in God's kingdom for abundant life] is the presence of God lived through your life and my life.

I came so that they may have life, and have it abundantly. Let us live abundantly.