

Natalie W. Bell
 May 14, 2017

The Good Shepherd
John 10:1-10

1 "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.

2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Isn't that what we all want?

Abundant life?

Meaningful life?

Real life?

But don't we sometimes look for this in all the ***wrong places?***

Like in what we eat, or drink, or wear?

in how we live, what we own, or how many Facebook friends we have?

But what if there is a ***way to find*** true abundant life?

What if Jesus was making a *real promise*—to us? Today?

This passage comes at an *important time in the Gospel* of John.
 Just before this is Jesus heals a *man born blind*—giving him abundant life.
 The disciples see the blind man and ask Jesus—
 who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?
 And Jesus says neither—this man’s blindness is to show the work of God in his
 life, and with that he heals the man,
 a man who had previously spent his life as a beggar on the street.

But the *Pharisees*, the religious leaders of the day,
 decide to investigate this healing by Jesus,
 because it was done on the Sabbath.
 They say Jesus can’t be from God,
 because he’s done work on the Sabbath.
 They all argue about this healing, and completely miss the point—
 Jesus has brought him new life.
 Abundant life—by restoring his sight and his place in the community!
 Jesus finally comes back to the man,
 and tells him who He is,
 and he tells the Pharisees that they are the ones who are really blind!

This whole story of Jesus as the Gate and the Shepherd
 is *addressed to the Pharisees*,
 the ones who are not bringing any life to their flocks,
 the ones who cannot see the new life that Jesus offers!

This story about the gate, the sheep, and the shepherd is meant to explain
who Jesus is, and what he does.

Jesus ends up using different metaphors for himself in John 10,
 saying both I am the Gate, and I am the Good Shepherd,
 because they don't seem to understand what he’s saying to them.

The question for us is, *do WE understand* Jesus?
 Do we understand who He is, and what he does for us?

What is Jesus saying to you in this story?
 And what is He saying *to all of us* as a family of faith?

We *miss the point* if we get caught up in the different metaphors,
And forget that the whole point is *finding abundant life*.

The image of sheep and the shepherd,
their sheepfold and the gate,
would have been *very familiar to people back then*
who saw sheep and shepherds on a daily basis.
Sheep were very valuable resources in those times,
They needed a shepherd.

Shepherds were low on the social ladder,
but they were vital to the culture and economy.
Their job was to keep the sheep safe and healthy,
to make sure they stayed alive.

Sheep are not the sharpest crayons in the box,
so they really depend on their shepherd.
Without the leadership and tender care of their shepherd,
they could easily die from disease, starvation, or an attack by a predator.
Without the shepherd's care they could be stolen by a thief or bandit.

Sheep are also pretty funny creatures.
If they fall down on their backs with their feet in the air,
that's called being 'cast down'—
an image that is found throughout the Psalms actually—
and they need a shepherd to help put them upright,
or they can die in that position!

Sheep that are giving *birth* but sitting uphill can die giving birth,
instead of just turning around so gravity can help them.

Sheep that see another one go *off a cliff*... will follow...right to their death.
Sheep that are not protected from pests or disease, they too will perish.
And of course there are the wolves and other animals who can attack the
sheep, unless the shepherd intervenes.

So how do the shepherds take care of the sheep?

Well, they use their *voice* to lead and guide them.
Sheep are smart enough to know their shepherd's voice—

so even if they are penned up together with many different flocks, whenever their shepherd calls with his voice, they will follow him. Shepherds would often name their sheep, and call them by name!

I think this is significant because Jesus often changes lives by **calling people by name**.

Remember when he calls Mary by name after his resurrection?
Remember that he calls Lazarus by name to raise him from death?
How does Jesus call your name today?

In our part of the world shepherds lead by herding from behind, but in the middle east, shepherds **lead** the sheep. They **go before the sheep** to make sure the pastures are green, and the way is safe, they gently lead them to the best places for food and drink.

That's why **Psalm 23** says the Lord is my shepherd...I shall not want... he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters...

The shepherd would also have an **enclosure** for the sheep at night, where there was one way in and out, through a **gate**. When Jesus says **I am the Gate**, he's saying that he is the way—he is the way in and out for the sheep. He is the way of safety and security for them. If they go his way, he will keep them together.

The shepherd had to keep the flock together. A sheep on his own is a **lost sheep**, just like I told the kids today. Sheep can survive much together, but not on their own, And they rely upon the leadership of a good shepherd to stay alive.

All throughout the Bible you can find references to God as the Shepherd of the people. **Psalm 23** is one of the most familiar, isn't it?

But several times, God the shepherd is **contrasted with evil shepherds**,

kind of like Jesus the Good Shepherd is contrasted here with the thieves and bandits.

In **Ezekiel 34:2** God says:

*Ah, you shepherds Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 3 You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but **you do not feed** the sheep.*

*4 You have **not strengthened** the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.*

In **Isaiah 56:10-12** God says, *The shepherds have no understanding, they have turned their own way, they **ignore** the sheep.*

In **Jeremiah 10:21** God is really blunt:

*The shepherds are **stupid**, they do **not seek** the Lord, all their flock is scattered.*

People back then would have heard Jesus' words, and understood the importance of a **good shepherd**, and **sheep staying together**, they would have known these **scriptures** about bad shepherds.

The Good Shepherd is Essential!

I read something interesting about [Psalm 23](#) this week.

Listen to what it sounds like if we remove all references to the shepherd from the Psalm:

1 my ... I shall be in want.

2 me ... me

3 my soul ... me

4 I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear ... me ... me.

5 me in the presence of my enemies ... my head ... my cup

6 me all the days of my life ... I will dwell

Paul Miller, The Praying Life (NavPress, 2009)

We need the Good Shepherd!

Otherwise our lives are all about **me, me, me.**

What if this is part of Jesus' promise of **abundant life**?

We know that **for sheep, abundant life** is

green pastures, still waters, safety, security,
 a trusting relationship with the shepherd.
 Abundant life for a sheep is knowing that the shepherd cares for them.
 It's also life with the other sheep—the flock, living together.

But what about us?
 Could abundant life be the *same for all of us*?
 I think we sure need the *green pastures and still waters*—places of
 nourishment, refreshment and rest!
 And don't we need the *safety and security*
 of knowing that God is watching out for us?
 That Jesus is the one leading us?
 Don't we need that *relationship of trust* with our Good Shepherd?

But maybe even more importantly, don't we *need the flock*?
 Don't we need the *community* of our fellow believers,
 all of us doing life together?
 Instead of life being about me—*what if life is about US*?

I think it's safe to say that one of us out doing our own thing all alone
 is kind of like a stray sheep—it means we are *lost*.

This is not what our world would say.
 We are taught to pull ourselves up with our bootstraps, to be individuals,
 making *our own way* in this world.

But as Christians, our calling is different.
Abundant life is life lived together—in community.

A few years ago a study of nearly 400 Americans found that pursuing
happiness focuses on "*taking*"
 While pursuing *meaning and purpose* focuses on "*giving*."
 Researchers found that happiness for most is about feeling good, good
 physical health, and buying things they need and want.
 The *pursuit of happiness* is actually about being a "taker",
 and not helping others in need."
 It's all about me.
 In contrast, people with meaningful lives get a lot of *joy from giving to*
others, taking care of kids, serving others.

People whose lives have high levels of meaning help others, even when it comes at the expense of their own happiness. Researchers wondered: What if the single-minded pursuit of happiness actually makes people less happy? Adapted from Emily Esfahani Smith, "There's More to Life than Being Happy," *The Atlantic* (1-9-13)

Reminds me of what *Tolstoy* once said,
 "The only certain happiness in life is to live for others."

That study makes me wonder—are we trying to *find abundant life ourselves*, or *looking to Jesus* for our meaning in life?

It was *life in community* that Jesus always brought to the lost and broken. When he healed people he restored them to community. When he fed people, it was in community. His own disciples were a community with him day and night.

This week in our *Wednesday night Bible study* we were talking about unity of the body of Christ, and how important it is for us to have real fellowship and relationships with one another. We *need each other*, if we are to stay healthy and grow in our faith!

I was telling them that one of my *biggest dreams* for this church would be for every single person to be in a group of some kind—a Bible study, a fellowship group, a group of people serving together.

Because it is *only in that kind of community* that we can grow in our faith, encourage one another and hold one another accountable. We can't accomplish all of that on Sunday mornings during the passing of the peace, or even during coffee hour.

But when Amy and I are working together at the *Youth Café* every Tuesday—we can encourage one another's faith. When the other volunteers serve together, they are creating community!

When the *fellowship* ladies come together for projects, when the *Christian Ed* folks come together for VBS,

when the **men gather** together to work on the building,
 when the **music folks** gather for practice,
 those are opportunities for us to encourage each other,
 and grow in our faith—if we make the most of that time together.

That's why it's so important for us to **take time to be together**
 outside of Sunday morning,
 to talk with each other about our faith,
 to pray together,
 to serve together.
 This is how we **grow and deepen our faith**.

Many churches have lots of **small groups** for this.
 We're a small church, so it's challenging to have very many small groups, but
 we do have many opportunities to grow together.
 It's just whether we take advantage of that or not.
Are you taking time to get into a small group somewhere?

Jesus came that we might have **abundant life**.
 He lived and died and was raised from death—
 that we might be forgiven of our sins,
 and given new and eternal life—an abundant life that begins right now.

And that abundant life is not just for us as individuals.
 It's for our **church community**.
 And it even extends **beyond our church family**.

So what if Jesus brings us abundant life,
 So that **we might help others** to find that abundant life?

I like what Pastor David Lose wrote:
For the man born blind, abundant life is sight. It is release from dependence. It is freedom and light and new opportunity.
*This, in turn, invites us to imagine that abundant life...is highly **contextual**.*
*For the **blind** man it is sight.*
*For the **single parent** it might be companionship and help.*
*For the **bullied teen** it might be acceptance and an advocate.*
*For the **impoverished neighborhood** it might be dignity and the chance of self-determination.*

For the **retiree**, it might be involvement in a worthwhile cause. ...

... of course, ...we must first pay attention to what is robbing the children of God near us of life and then stand with them against those forces so that they might have, not just life, but life in abundance. "Abundant Life Now", by David Lose, [Dear Working Preacher](#), 2014

Abundant life **looks different** in different places and to different people, but it's always about **life, purpose, and joy**...

So what about you?

Do you **want** abundant life?

Are you **looking to Jesus** for that life?

Are you **looking in community** for that life?

And what about your **neighbors**?

Are you **helping others** find their abundant life?

What if in doing so, we actually find our own abundant life?

Jesus said, I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.

That is the **Good News** of the Gospel today,

And all the people said, Amen.