



“The Good Shepherd”
Scripture – John 10:1-10
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 7, 2017

Michael Jinkins, the President of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, was sitting in a hotel lobby in Atlanta. He was attending a conference and waiting for the final session to begin. While passing the time, a thought surfaced in his mind: “This is your life.”

Much of the time, many of us think that our life is something that we will get back to as soon as we finish what we are currently doing; or our life is something we will begin when we have the time.

As Jinkins sat in that lobby, it dawned on him that in the previous three weeks he had been at home and on the Louisville campus for a day and a half – barely enough time to repack his suitcase, plow through the work piled on his desk, meet with staff, and participate in a couple of conference calls with the seminary trustees.

Reflecting on his activities, the obvious occurred to him: THIS is my life. Life does not simply consist of our normal routine or what we love to do or the things that match our vision of our life. It consists of the moments we are sitting in a lobby and standing in line at the grocery and driving children to music lessons and waiting for the doctor. Our life is answering emails, speaking to strangers, and calling friends.

Of course, Jinkins already knew this, but that day it was more than information. It was an awakening. He thought to himself: This is my life. Right here. Right now. Not somewhere else when things settle down.

Well, if that’s the case – and surely it is – then we cannot risk postponing joy, meaning, and love to some other time. We cannot afford to waste our precious moments by ignoring how precious they are.

Jinkins says, “If this is your life, suspended between birth and death, between the past and the future...(then) our life is what happens to us, not when we’ve arrived at a destination, but also on the way...We’re not waiting for life to happen. It is happening, whether we are paying attention or not.”¹

If life is happening right now, not later, then it begs the question: What is the *quality* of our lives? Is your life just one thing after another or is your life joyful, meaningful, and hopeful?

Today’s passage is about the quality of our lives. Jesus says that he has come so that we may have *abundant* life. Or, as The Message Bible translates his words: “better life than we ever dreamed of.” God wants us to live rich and fulfilling lives not some day, but now; not only in the next life, but this life.

In today's text, Jesus invokes a popular metaphor from the Jewish Scriptures, calling himself "Shepherd" and his followers "sheep." In an agrarian society where sheep and shepherds were common, people naturally identified with this figure of speech. In 21st century North America, most people's experience of sheep is little more than wearing a wool sweater. Raise your hand if you know a real, live shepherd.

In addition, few want to be identified as sheep because sheep have traditionally been touted as not being the brightest bulbs in the animal kingdom's chandelier. Yet, whether we identify with the metaphor or not, it is easy to understand. A shepherd cares for his sheep, protects them, and leads them to places they can flourish.

Our world is a wonderful place, but it is also a risky place. The world is where we can discover great joy, but also suffer tremendous heartache. As each day unfolds and challenges come our way, we need someone or some principle to guide us. The metaphor may sound a bit archaic or too rural, but all of us need a shepherd.

There are shepherds in the classroom who provide knowledge and wisdom. There are shepherds in work places who provide guidance and incentives. There are shepherds in the media and even in elected office – although some might say that's an insult to shepherds!

There are actually numerous shepherds vying for the chance to lead us to verdant pastures. One of our challenges is to figure out which shepherds we can trust. Which shepherds have our well-being in mind and which are using us for their own ends? There are trustworthy shepherds who can provide helpful guidance, but there is only one shepherd who can truly lead us to an abundant life.

However, we can be as stubborn as sheep, can't we? We yearn for a rich life, yet how much do we trust the guidance of the Good Shepherd? Are we willing to take the risk of venturing into new pastures, or do we really just want to stay fenced in our familiar and secure pens?

Many of us strangle an abundant life because we have grown too secure with our daily pattern. How many times has fear of the unknown stifled an interesting, new friendship with someone unlike you? How many times have you been so overly cautious that you missed an opportunity to spark a flicker of joy in someone mired in sorrow? How many times have you played it safe and smothered the prospect of blazing a new path? We say we want the abundant life God offers, but we often balk at taking a risk to attain it.

We also sabotage an abundant life when we lack the courage to follow the Good Shepherd when following means going against the tide. The novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, tells the story of a German boy named Werner, "who is selected to attend an elite Nazi training school. At the school, he befriends a near-sighted boy named Frederick, who has a love for birds. Part of the discipline of this training school is to ferret out the weakest boys so that only the strong endure. Of course, the near-sighted boy who loves birds is picked on by the bullies. Werner begs him to go back home, but Frederick refuses."

"Later, a man who has escaped from a concentration camp is re-captured. The prisoner is staked to a post outside on a freezing winter day, and the commander orders the boys to go one-by-one and throw a pail of water on him. The first cadet dutifully marches out and does what is commanded. The water hits the prisoner, and he is awakened and delirious. What follows are orders fulfilled. It is torturous. Finally, the pail is passed into the hands of Frederick. He takes his pail of water and pours it on the ground. The commander gives him another pail of water. Once again, Frederick pours it on the ground. The commander shouts, 'I order you!' and Frederick replies, 'I will not.'"² An abundant life possesses the courage to live a just and merciful life, no matter what everyone else is doing.

Finally, I wonder if the main reason we do not wholeheartedly embrace the abundant life God offers is because we fail to recognize the urgency of today. We live as if we have plenty of time to commit to the way of the Good

Shepherd so we put things off. Ellen Bass writes, “What if you knew you’d be the last (person) to touch someone?” She continues, “A friend told me she’d been with her aunt. They’d just had lunch and the waiter, a young gay man with plum black eyes, joked as he served the coffee, (and) kissed her aunt’s powdered cheek when they left. Then they walked half a block and her aunt dropped dead on the sidewalk.”³

If we knew this would be someone’s last day; if we knew this would be OUR last day, we would strive more resolutely for the abundant life God yearns for us to live. How much more alive we would be – how much more attuned to beauty and compassion and justice and peace we would be – if we embraced the urgency of today because tomorrow is not guaranteed?

Author John O’Donohue, writes, “When you open your heart to discovery, you will be called to step outside the comfort barriers with which you have fortified your life. You will be called to risk old views and thoughts, and to step off the circle of routine and image. This will often bring turbulence...But your soul loves the danger of growth.”⁴ Our souls love the danger of growth.

God envisions us breaking new ground that leads to an abundant life. Perhaps a new beginning is already hovering deep within *your* soul, waiting for you to recognize it. Maybe a feeling of emptiness or restlessness will awaken you to a new venture that is beckoning you.

What’s holding you back from breaking new ground? Self-imposed obligations? Lack of imagination? Fear of the unknown? The excuse of age? Pride?

The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh said, “To be dead is to stop believing in the masterpieces we will begin tomorrow.”

Though the future may seem hazy and your destination unclear, the Good Shepherd can lead you to such riches as love, joy, beauty, and peace. Trust the Good Shepherd to show you the way.

NOTES

1. Michael Jenkins, “This Is Your Life,” *Thinking Out Loud*, April 18, 2017.
2. Donovan Allan Drake, “If These Were Silent...” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2017, pp. 41-42.
3. Ellen Bass, “If You Knew,” *The Human Line*, (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), p. 50.
4. John O’Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, (New York: Perennial, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), p. 19.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Eternal God, we come to this table, rejoicing that you are our God! You made all that is – earth and sky, trees of the field and birds of the air. You formed humankind in your image, breathing into us the breath of life. When your creative work was done, you looked upon your children, and proclaimed us ‘very good’ in your sight.

But, we have denied our created identity and turned away from you. Throughout time, we have turned a blind eye toward injustice, abused the earth, and failed to love you with heart, soul, and might. Yet, you love us so much that you will not let us go. In every age, you have raised up prophets among us to shepherd us back to you. When we have least deserved your compassion, you have led us beside still waters and set us on right paths. Nowhere is your grace more clear than in the gift of your Son, who came that we might have life ... and have it abundantly. Faithful to your purpose, Jesus went to the cross and gave himself up to death. Rising from the grave, he conquered death and made all things new! We rejoice in all you have done, O God!

And now you prepare a table before us – a table where the cup of grace overflows and all are welcome to the feast. As we gather for this holy meal, we remember the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord. Send your Holy Spirit upon us, that this meal may draw us closer to you and to all who share this feast. May this bread and this cup sustain us, strengthen us, and encourage us for your work in this world. Send us out from this table, to love as Christ loved in all places that are hungry for your hope, your peace, and your joy.

We pray rejoicing in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who taught us to pray together: **Our Father ...**