

Psalm 23

23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

23:3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

23:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.

23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

John 10:1-10

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.

10:2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

10:3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

10:4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

10:5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

10:6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

10:7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

10:8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

10:9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

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

Proclamation of the Word

Think of all the gates you encounter.

There are gates to enter a football stadium to allow those with tickets in and keep those without out.

There are gates that allow you to keep your pets in the backyard and to keep predators out.

I went to the Middle School and High Schools this week. To enter, I had to get through locked doors which served as gates.

Some of us live in a gated community, where only approved members and guests might enter.

We use gates all the time. They are passageways by which we enter and leave an enclosed, protected area, but gates are also used to exclude and separate. When Jesus calls himself a gate, I recalled how the church in Calvin's Geneva fenced the table. It was a practice for the elders of the church to determine who could and could not receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, putting themselves in the place of judge. In effect, the grace and reconciliation offered to us by Jesus himself is fenced off for only the worthy or penitent sinner to come and receive the sacrament of grace. In the same way, the Roman Catholic Church practices excommunication, leaving some out of the communion- not allowing certain people like divorcees who are remarried to receive the sacrament. Fencing the table, excommunication, and other exclusion tactics have a long history in our church. These practices call into question both what we believe about the Sacrament and Jesus himself.

Is the Lord's Table for the weak and vulnerable to find food and protection or is it a privilege for the pure and those seeking perfection?

Is the Church of Jesus Christ a place of reconciliation for the broken and weak or for the holy and pure?

In our church history, Augustine believed that the church was a hospital for sinners, but Pelagius believed the church was a society for the perfectible. Let's look closer at our passage to see what we can learn. At first the focus on the Good Shepherd, the Lord, who in a bit of confusing mixed metaphor also calls himself the Gate. While good shepherd makes much more sense, we will focus a little on the Gate image. Unlike a fence of separation, a gate allows sheep to come in and go out.

In our Scripture today, Jesus speaks to the Pharisees and religious people, not his disciples. These Jews have just seen him heal the eyes of a blind man and question Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. The man who was born blind now sees that Jesus is the Son of Man, but the Pharisees are spiritually blind. In other words, Jesus is speaking to the Chosen people who assumed their privilege and priority as the ones God has saved. When they don't get the first image of Shepherd, Gatekeeper, sheep, thief and bandit, Jesus says, "Hey try to think of it this way..."

10:7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Aha! With all these confusing images of sheep, gates, Shepherd, here is the essence of what Jesus is telling us. Jesus is claiming his mission, his purpose.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"- Abundant Life is what Jesus is offering.

When I hear that my mind hearkens back to the more well-known mission statement of Jesus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

What is salvation if it is not abundant life? Notice that abundant life is different than a life of abundance. This is not the prosperity gospel of do right, believe in Jesus and you will be blessed materially and free from pain. Jesus speaks in metaphor about a relationship that is two-fold.

First, that relationship between God in Jesus Christ and us is one of trust and dependence. It is a relationship that enjoys the benefits of being led beside still waters and our souls being restored. But the relationship is one that also trust and follows through the darkest valley where God's staff comforts us. We enjoy the coming in to pasture where we are fed, nourished, safe, but we also are led out by our leader and guide who walks with us out into wilderness, danger, and even death. Abundant life means being in a relationship with God.

One hymn based on Psalm 23 has the most beautiful line at the end,

*O may your house be my abode, and all my work be praise.
There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come;
no more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.ⁱ*

Home is what we most yearn for. Home is a place, but it is nothing without the presence of God's love and loving relationships with each other. In Jesus Christ, God dwelt with us, and made his home among us for awhile so that we can be like a child at home.

Secondly, we cannot be sheep alone. Sheep live in flocks. Our walk with God includes walking with His people, his flock. Our abundant life is one of community.

To illustrate, let's think back to the story right before our passage today. Jesus heals a man born blind. He had begged by the gate, either invisible to all who passed by or a source of discomfort for those who were uncomfortable with his disability and situation. What happened was more than his sight being restored. He receives salvation and abundant life. Karoline Lewis comments,

The man blind from birth is saved from isolation and marginalization. His healing saves him from everlasting darkness. Never again will he wonder where his next meal will be or who will answer his pleas as he sits begging outside the city. He will know the safety and security of community.ⁱⁱ

In other words, his dignity has been restored along with his sight.

As David Lose writes, in this way, Jesus

...invites us to imagine that abundant life -- and perhaps salvation itself -- 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. For ... Well, you get the picture. Abundant life looks different in different places and to different people, but it always manifests itself as a response to whatever seeks to rob the children of God of their inheritance of life, purpose, and joy.ⁱⁱⁱ

That community of saints and sinners, weak and strong, rich and poor is a veritable menagerie of sheep. C.S. Lewis defined mere christianity as "A divine God doing a divine work so humans who are in no way divine could be a part of a divine plan."^{iv}

And lest, we who count ourselves among the sheep become too smug, Jesus says in John 10:16, "I have other sheep who are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd."

Part of that divine plan is to gather all the sheep and bring abundant life to all whom God has created. A gate is intending to allow us to come in and go out, not keep us safely pastured and comfortable. We are called to go out and bring more people in.

The church then is called to bring abundant life and let God decide who is in the fold or not. Abundant life is eating together, sharing pasture, bringing health, security, and well-being.

That is why Christians have always worked for social righteousness and peace in the world. Our response to that gift of abundant life is to share it with our neighbors, regardless of what pen they have been placed in. From Syria to South Sudan, Christians are speaking out and working to provide for others in need, but also to call the powers that be to act. You may even be surprised to know that the original call to act and speak eventually turned into a special day we celebrate today called Mother's Day. One hundred years ago in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson, a good Presbyterian Christian, signed a bill designating this Sunday in May as Mother's Day at the push from Women, particularly a Methodist women's group. But 44 years earlier a call came from Julia Ward Howe who also penned "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." In the wake of Civil War in this nation she wrote in 1870:

A Mother's Day Proclamation^v
Julia Ward Howe, 1870
Arise then...women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts!
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:
"We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,
For caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country,
Will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."
From the voice of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with
Our own. It says: "Disarm! Disarm!
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."

Mother's day began as a social movement calling for social righteousness, for justice, and reconciliation among those of this nation and towards other nations. Jesus' promise of abundant life is not something to selfishly hoard for ourselves, it is call to not only come into pasture and enjoy the benefits of God, but to go out together to share God's benefits.

You and I as part of God's flock and our Mother, the Church, are called to follow Jesus who is a Gate.

Let us follow him in abundant life and share that with others in his name.

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ⁱ Isaac Watts, "My Shepherd Will Supply my Need (Psalm 23)" from *Glory to God; The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2013).

ⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis, Lectionary Study on John 10:1-10 at Working Preacher for May 11, 2014.
www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1993

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose, "Abundant Life," at workingpreacher.com for May 11, 2014.

^{iv} C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (HarperCollins: New York, 1952).

^v Howe, Julia Ward. "Mother's Day proclamation. (World Notes)." Catholic New Times 1 June 2003: 11. Academic OneFile. Web. 12 May 2012.