

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking: 'Listen! He is calling you by name. Look! That is the best path to follow. Can you smell the fresh grass in that meadow? Taste, and see how good it is. Feel how soft it is to lie on. With God as our shepherd, we have everything we need.'

Hymn – Immortal, invisible, God only wise,

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Creator God, carer and consoler, protector and defender, we come together this day in awe of your majesty and forever grateful for willingness to show your constant love to every one of us, each called by name. In this season of new birth, growth and change, we give thanks for all that we have been given and all that you continue to do for us, even when we are not aware of what it may be.

Gracious God, as we come before you, we know that we may stray from the flock, or fail to follow your guidance; we may falter on our path towards your promised kingdom, but we live and rejoice in the knowledge that your forgiveness is given freely, and that it is by the gift of your grace that our lives remain blessed.

Loving God, as we gather together, we do so in hope and prayer that you continue to shine your light of love on and into our lives, and the lives of all your beloved children; that your Spirit will continue to guide us through our journey towards you; and that we will remember always, that our saviour laid down his life for the love of us, that we might live.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Readings: John 10: 11 - 18

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep. ¹² When the hired man, who is not a shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees a wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away; so the wolf snatches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ The hired man runs away because he is only a hired man and does not care about the sheep.

¹⁴⁻¹⁵ I am the good shepherd. As the Father knows me and I know the Father, in the same way I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them. ¹⁶ There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my voice, and they will become^[a] one flock with one shepherd.

¹⁷ “The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life, in order that I may receive it back again. ¹⁸ No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it back. This is what my Father has commanded me to do.”

Hymn – What a faithful God have I

Sermon – ‘Shepherding’

Does my life matter? Do I make a difference, and if so, how? I suspect we all struggle with these questions or questions like them. I am, fairly, certain, that at some level, they are always with us and we do not just want someone else to say yes. We want to be able to say yes for ourselves.

I think that is part of the reason for why we often strive to keep ourselves busy. We are trying to show that our life matters and that we make a difference. It is often the unstated, maybe even the unknown reason, why, especially when we are young and developing our careers, we work so hard. We have got to prove ourselves, we have got to acquire, we have got to achieve, because we want to make sure that people know, and more importantly, that we know, that our life matters and makes a difference. We have probably all had times when we look back on our life, maybe when the kids move out or when we retire, and we ask ourselves what we have done and whether we have made a difference in this world.

Regardless of when or how those questions come up I think they are grounded in a deep longing and desire for abundance in our life. We want to be an abundant people. We want to live an abundant life.

Today's Gospel begins with verse 11, but I want to begin with verse 10 in which Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly." That verse is right in the middle of what is often called the Good Shepherd discourse. Today we hear the second half of that discourse.

"I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly." These words set the tone for Jesus telling of today's story about the good shepherd, the hired hand, the sheep, and the wolf.

Abundance

And so, I want to look at those four images in relationship to abundance. Where do you experience abundance in your life and what does that look like? What does abundance mean for you? What does it feel like when you live apart or distant from abundance? Now I am not talking about abundance in terms of quantity. It is not a quantity. Abundance is a quality of life. It is a way of being.

We can all tell stories of times in our life when there was something we wanted and we worked hard or we waited a long time and we finally got that thing we wanted and once we had it, it did not do what we thought it would. It did not fill us up. It did not fulfil. It did not satisfy. We got what we wanted but we had no abundance.

Abundance 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 is good, true, and beautiful in this world. It is not so much about getting something we do not have but living more fully into what is already present. So that abundance is love that leads to love. It is joy that leads to joy. It is peace that leads to peace. It is kindness that leads to kindness. It is stepping more deeply and more fully into our own life and into the life of another. It never adds to the pain of the world. Abundance is Jesus' way of being in this world. It is the presence of God lived through your life and my life.

So, what if we took those four images in today's gospel, the good shepherd, the sheep, the hired hand, and the wolf, and considered them as lenses through which to see abundance, windows onto the abundant life?

The Good Shepherd

When you hear about the good shepherd, who do you think of? Jesus. Yes, that is the usual answer, and it is a correct answer. I am not disputing that it is Jesus, but could it

be more than Jesus? Could you be the good shepherd? Could I be the good shepherd? Who have been good shepherds in your life?

I do not ask these questions to take away from Jesus, but to expand, enlarge, and extend his presence. Think about what **Psalm 23** says about the shepherd. What does the shepherd do? The shepherd leads and guides. The shepherd revives. The shepherd protects. The shepherd comforts. The shepherd nourishes and feeds. The shepherd sets a table of welcome and hospitality in the difficult places of life.

When have you experienced that in your life? Have you ever had someone guide you in your life? Has someone ever set a table for and welcomed you? Who has fed and nourished your soul? Have you ever had someone walk with you through the valley of the shadow of death? Were they not good shepherds to you? Have you ever had someone say or do just the right thing and he or she revived your soul when you just could not do it for yourself?

Or how about those times you did those things for someone else? You set the table. You were the guide. You were the companion. You were the reviver. You were the good shepherd. I think this is happening in all sorts of ways. It happens when we parent. It happens when we love our spouse. It happens when we care for a sick or dying friend, parent, or spouse. It happens when someone shows up and says, "Can I talk to you about my life? I want to tell you what's going on," and they ask us to be their shepherd. It happens when we go to another and say, "Let me tell you what happened to me. I can't make sense of this," and we ask her or him to be our shepherd.

The point I am trying to make is that the shepherd, regardless of who it is, is always leading to abundance. The shepherd is always leading to the green pastures, to the still waters, to the table that is set and the cup that is overflowing. It is always about getting to that place of abundance.

However, it is not as if abundance was not already there. It has always been here, right before us. Sometimes we just need someone to help us find it, to point to it, to show us that it is already here, and to remind us of what really matters most. I am certain every one of you has shepherded someone else and that there have been times in your life when someone else shepherded you.

Sheep

So, what about the sheep? Who are the sheep typically thought to be? Us, yes. Jesus is the good shepherd. He leads, we follow, that is how it is supposed to work. I have got nothing against that, but again I want to expand the images, to enlarge them, to make them windows, as I said, windows with which you might see the abundance in your life.

So, what if the sheep are the things that really matter, the things that have ultimate value? What if the sheep are the things entrusted to us and that we entrust to another?

Think about sheep as your parenting or your grand parenting, your loving, your friendships, your marriage, your teaching, your hopes, your dreams, your losses, your sorrows, your fears. We have all got them. We have all entrusted those things into the hands and the life of another and we have also been entrusted with those things by another. Someone comes to you and says, "You know, I'm really struggling in my marriage. Can I tell you what's going on?" They are a sheep asking for your shepherd guidance. Or you go to someone and say, "I don't know what to do with my child," or "I don't know how to get through this tough spot in life. I just need some courage and some hope." You are the sheep looking for a shepherd.

There is something about sheep that is abundant. It is in their vulnerability, their honesty, and the way they hope. They are full and whole and life giving. It is why they matter, why we care for them. It is why we receive that entrustment with great respect and honour.

The Hired Man

Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the hired man. The hired man, he says, does not own the sheep and does not care for the sheep. For the good shepherd, the sheep are the goal and the reason for everything the shepherd does. The sheep are everything to the good shepherd. For the hired man, however, they are just the means. The hired man punches the timesheet and shows up to receive his or her wages and when the shift is over, she is gone. He takes off. And if it gets too difficult, too scary, too risky, too "wolfy" the hired hand takes off and runs away.

The hired hand lives by quantity not abundance. Probably every one of you could tell a story about a hired hand in your life, someone who, when you most needed him or her, ran out on you and left you. Who have been the hired hands in your life?

There is another side to that question that is equally if not more painful. It asks us to look at our life and the times that we were the hired hand to someone else, times when she or he needed us, and we ran out her or him. Hired hands stay only as long as the wages are good. The hired hand either refuses to see or cannot see the abundance that is already there. She or her trades abundance for wages. In what ways have you experienced the hired hand in your life?

Wolf

Where there is a hired hand there is probably also a wolf. Wolves, Jesus says, snatch and scatter. Wolves devour life. They destroy abundance. They carry it off. Wolves come in all sorts of shapes and sizes in our world today. Sometimes it is the wolf of busyness, the wolf of achievement, the wolf of needing approval, or the wolf of having to be right and in control. Sometimes, it is the wolf of fear, or the wolf of anger and resentment. Or maybe it is the wolf of failure, the wolf of despair, the wolf of brokenness. What wolves are you dealing with in your life today? How have they snatched and scattered your abundance or the abundance of another?

A Picture of Abundance

In some way Jesus is taking these four images and using them to paint a picture of abundance in our life. If we let them, if we look through these images and not just at them, these images all point to the abundant life Jesus is bringing and offering us.

It is so easy to see the good shepherd and the sheep as images of abundance. They point to what is. But what about the hired hand and the wolf? That is more difficult and yet, they also point to abundance but in a different way. They point to what is not there. They remind us of what has been lost and carried away. Abandoned. It is not as if the abundance was never there or can never be regained again. It has just got lost, scattered, forgotten.

So, what do you see when you look through these windows on your life? Where is the abundance? What matters about you and your life? How might these images help you to make a difference? To live the abundant life. What will you do with what you see through these windows?

I cannot tell you what to do. A couple of days ago someone said to me, "I just want some answers. Give me some answers." I said, "I have no answers." I have no answers for you or me. I am not offering these four images as answers but simply as invitations

to open our eyes and see what is. That is all that Jesus is really doing with this story. He is not giving any answers either.

Jesus says, "You've got good shepherds, sheep, wolves, and hired hands," but he never really says what we are to do with that. It is almost as if he is saying, "Look at this in your life and begin to work it out. Make sense of it for yourself." There is not one right answer. There is only each of us working it out in our life. That becomes even more clear when step back from today's readings and see where it sits in the sequence of other stories. Sometimes it is helpful and insightful to look at where the gospel story falls in relationship to what comes before and what comes after.

Immediately before this section, Jesus heals the man who was born blind at birth. He opens his eyes. There is a new seeing, new vision, new insight. And then Jesus tells the good shepherd story. After the good shepherd story, the next big story is the raising of Lazarus. Do you see what is happening? Do you see the sequence? Restored sight, the good shepherd, new life.

Jesus is saying that we must open your eyes, we must see, we must look at these images in order to step through them to the new life that he is bringing us, the abundant life he is offering us.

So, what will you do with those four images today? You have got to know that we are never just one of them. We are all of them. They are all parts of us, pieces of our lives, ways that we have been, and experiences that we have had.

Every one of us could tell a story when we were the good shepherd and we guided, and we protected, and we nourished and we could tell a story of how, ten minutes later, we were the hired hand, and we ran out. We could talk about the sheep that matter and are so valuable and we could tell stories about the wolves that devour, snatch, and scatter. It would be easy to divide this reading into good characters and bad characters. Let us not do that. Let us just hear this story as information about our lives, without making a judgment or a conclusion, but simply as an opening to the abundant life.

"I have come," Jesus says, "that they may have life and have it more abundantly." It is his starting point and it's his goal. Abundant life is Jesus' promise to each of us.

In the Name of the Loving Father, the Risen Son, and the Guiding Spirit. Amen.

Hymn – You’re the Word of God the Father

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Loving God, help us to see your presence in our lives, your abundant gifts poured out on all your creation given that we might live well, in peace and in love, sharing the joy of each other as well as the burdens.

Today, as disease continues to spread throughout our world, and health care workers become ever more stretched, we pray that you help us to never avert our eyes when any of your children are suffering, instead let us hear your call to create lasting change.

Today, as the economic and political situation at home and in other countries continues to sow division, greed, and distress, we think particularly of our leaders struggling to guide us through these difficult days, as well as those who continue to put themselves forward for public service. We pray that you help us all to know that we are never self-sufficient instead let us always be aware of how much we need each other.

Today, as your church continues to work for its place in a changing society, where anger impacts the lives of so many, where love is so often eclipsed by hate we pray that you help us to find our voices to speak up, and to speak out, in your name and for the sake of your message.

Dear Father, we come today to worship you for being our Shepherd and Saviour. Because of your love for us we lack nothing that we need and sometimes, when we wander from the path, you come and search for us. You come and lift us up into your arms and guide us along the paths of righteousness and goodness.

We do not have to be afraid of anything or anyone and when we are facing problems you are even closer and in times to come you will be our shepherd, leading us to safety.

Your greatness Father will reach to the ends of the earth and we will always love securely, for you are our peace, now and forever. In your great and gracious name, we pray. Amen.

Hymn – The Church’s one foundation

Benediction

As one of his beloved flock, let us go in peace to love and to serve Jesus, the good shepherd of us all. So, as we go, may the Blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit, rest upon you and all whom you love, this day and forevermore. Amen.

Closing Song – The Blessing (Lebanon)