

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Shepherds and Kings

Sermon Reflection Notes

We observed Good Shepherd Sunday this week. In ancient times and in the Bible, it was common to call kings shepherds. The kings of Israel are condemned when they scatter the flock and praised only when they protect the vulnerable. The prophet Ezekiel promised a day when God himself will come to shepherd the people, to seek the lost, and to heal the injured. That promise is fulfilled when Jesus enters into humanity, fully divine and fully human, God *with* us.

Shepherds, good shepherds, are found in the paddock with the sheep as they graze, in the barn shoveling manure, or in the pastures mending fences. They actively care for and interact with the flock. It is a beautiful image to think of God with us in the midst of our messy and dirty lives, actively caring for us and tending to us. Jesus uses this metaphor in the scripture passage from John we heard this week. But in Jesus' teachings, he is all the things: Jesus is the gate, and the gatekeeper. The shepherd, the fence, the guide, the trusted voice to which we listen.

If you survey a group of Christians and ask what Christianity is, you would probably get a variety of answers. Some would say Christianity is a moral code, a list of do's and don'ts. Others might focus on a rigid list of doctrines. Others still might talk about how Christianity is how you get into heaven and avoid hell. But the last verse of the scripture this week says that Jesus came so that "they may have life, and have it abundantly."

This sermon series is titled "Rise Up," an idea that happens now, not just after we die. Jesus rose from the grave so that we too can 'rise up' and live an abundant life. But what is an abundant life? Many people think of abundance and link it to having an abundance of possessions. It's the American dream after all. But that is not what Jesus means at all in John chapter ten. To live with abundance is not about having all the things you've ever wanted. To live with abundance is to live with an abundance of peace, and abundance of prayer, of contentment, of joy, and above all, an abundance of love. It's an abundance of God and friendship. Of being nurtured and nurturing one another. When our entire being is fully alive (heart, mind, soul, and strength) we glimpse the glory of God incarnate, we glimpse Jesus.

We risk losing sight of the goal though if we think of an abundant life as an easy life. Abundant life is doing the hard thing—the hard thing for God and for others. It can be cumbersome. It can be grinding. But you live alive. It's beautiful. What steals the beauty from an abundant life is often that which was meant to make our lives 'easier.' The machines and technology we've invented to save us time...time we think we use for the more meaningful parts of life. But how often do we spend more time staring at screens or feeling more isolated by the very inventions that saved us time? What practices do we engage in with our 'saved time' and are those practices life giving? Are they virtues or vices?

The Good Shepherd offers us abundant life—a life of real meaning, real connection, and real beauty. We must be intentional about discerning the voice of the shepherd who calls us by name. It is possible we have not been formed as well as sheep that 'will not follow a stranger'—formed to trust in the gate, the gatekeeper, the fence, and the shepherd. How do we strengthen ourselves, form ourselves more fully? Perhaps a starting place is to assume that if something is life-giving from God, it doesn't happen quickly. Instead, it takes time, and prayer, and work. As we think of our own lives, are we making real incarnational connections with God and one another? Are we engaging in worship, devotion, justice, and compassion?

One of the most beautiful things about this work is that it is not done alone. Formation is not a solitary act. The flock grows together. We have each other, and we share the same shepherd. We work

toward the same goals: to love God and love neighbor. We are one with each other just as the Shepherd is with us, in the muck and mire of the paddock. We follow the shepherd who is our king; a king who has no scarcity of mercy, who has more than enough grace, and who overflows with love. Abundant life is offered. We will follow the Good Shepherd?

Scripture

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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the role of a shepherd? What are the responsibilities and goals of a ‘good shepherd’?
2. The image of a good shepherd has been watered down in modern times to make Jesus interested in our individual welfare rather than our corporate well-being. What is corporate well-being and why might Jesus be more interested in that?
3. What might it mean to have ‘abundant life’? How is the Christian understanding of abundance different than that of popular culture?
4. What are the practices through which God leads us into abundant life?
5. We are taking a break from our weekly meetings for the summer. What can we actively do while we are away from this group to continue to discern the good shepherd’s voice and follow it faithfully? Where might we find abundance that we have missed before?

Closing Prayer

We have paused this day to consider the voices that speak to us. The voices are soft and they are loud. The voices are innocent and they are coercive. The voices become a cacophony of noise that pulls us in many directions. And so, we pause, once more, in our yearning to hear your voice O God, your voice that calls us by name, your voice that promised abundant life, your voice that proclaims your abiding presence.

Give us good ears, O God. Give us the grace and courage to listen. Help us to respond, knowing it is your voice that leads us to rejoice in your love for us, and it is your voice that leads us to love our neighbor. We pray in the name of Jesus, our Shepherd who calls us to follow in his footsteps. Amen.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."