

LIVING LIFE ABUNDANTLY
John 10: 1-10; Acts 2: 42-47
Fourth Sunday of Easter • May 3, 2020
by Pat Berger

What does it mean, for us to live life abundantly? Jesus begins, in our verses this morning from the Gospel according to John, with images that would have been quite familiar to his first listeners: he speaks of shepherds and sheep. We know that sheep are not among the brightest of God's good creations -- I'm never quite sure that listeners then or now ought to be thrilled to be compared to them. Jesus was living and telling stories in a society where most people knew more about sheep than do most of us, so on the one hand they might better grasp the story - and on the other hand, they might be even more insulted than we are at the comparison. In addition, John makes it clear to the reader that Jesus is using metaphors here, so it is possible that even when we think we have these verses figured out: we may be really wrong. We shall do our best.

Ordinarily, the sheepfold or the enclosure for the sheep would be a stone wall, which would be constructed close to the family home. New to me was that the wall would often be topped with branches from a thorn bush, in order to discourage the kind of thievery or banditry that this reading relates, and it would put off predators. There would be only one gate, or entry place. The gate would have a strong lock on it, again in an effort to prevent theft. This kind of theft was frequent, and would hit hard: one's sheep could be counted on to provide food and milk, clothing, and often they could be used as barter for others of life's necessities.

The sheepfold that Jesus references has a gatekeeper. That would indicate a large pen, probably one used by several families for their sheep. The gatekeeper would recognize the voice or call of each of the shepherds whose sheep belonged inside the enclosure; and the sheep would recognize the call of their own shepherd. "Keeper of the sheep" was not a prestigious position; we remember when the young David was called to be king of the Hebrew people that his father hadn't even thought to line him up with his older sons as a candidate for that position; after all, he was not strong or ruddy, and he was out keeping the sheep, he was a shepherd, for goodness' sake. Even though this job was not at all far up on the corporate ladder of the time, it was important. One of the important parts would have been the shepherd's call. Whether it was his voice or some kind of whistle or bell, the call would have been singular to that shepherd; his sheep would be the only ones who would respond to this call, and his sheep would not have followed any other call.

When the gatekeeper opened the gate to the shepherd, the shepherd would lead his sheep into the sheepfold for the night. There they would be safe, and

they would have enough food and water for the night. And in the morning, the shepherd would lead the sheep out that they might have pasture and water, the things that they would need in order to live -- in fact, to live a sheep's abundant life. A good shepherd -- like the one in Psalm 23, and one like Jesus tells his listeners that he is -- pays attention to those sheep and their surroundings all day long. A sheep will eat all of the grass within its reach -- and not necessarily move to find more grass. A good shepherd pays attention to that, and leads his sheep to more grass. Sheep will not drink from moving water; they need to be led, as the Psalmist wrote, to still water. The shepherd's rod and staff kept predators away from the sheep -- and, when necessary, kept the sheep from walking off of a steep path. Life lived abundantly, indeed.

Now, we may not fully understand why Jesus used this particular imagery, why he compared his followers to sheep. And we ought not to feel too bad that we don't understand, because: Jesus' first listeners didn't get it either, and they knew about sheep! "Jesus used this figure of speech with them," the writer of John tells us, "but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

So Jesus gave them a big clue. "I am the gate for the sheep," he said. I AM. Remember when Moses asked God who he should tell the people had sent him, what was the Holy One's name, and God said, "Tell them that I Am has sent you." "I Am Who I Am," was the Holy name, or "I Will Be Who I Will Be," depending on which Bible translation one uses. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus makes statements that put together the divine "I Am" with his humanness: I Am the bread, I Am the life, I Am the light, I Am the truth, I Am the way; here, we read I Am the gate. Jesus was given to us to show us God's saving love for the divine beloved children -- children who need to be led to safety, who need to be led to food and to drink and to other things; who need to be led, that is, to life abundant.

We hear in our reading from the Acts what "living abundantly" meant in the early church. The people "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching," we are told. From the beginning, studying the holy writings was important to the health and authenticity of those who were the church. I am beginning to learn what living abundantly means here at Plymouth, too. We, too, need to hear scripture, to read scripture, to study scripture. What that means for each of us will differ; worship offers opportunities, as do Bible studies and other classes we might take, and we can read and study at home, which was not really possible in Jesus' day.

Early believers devoted themselves to prayer. They learned the Lord's Prayer; they prayed the psalms; they prayed in worship and at home. Talking with their relational God was imperative. And, ". . . day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." We don't know if they had a prayer chain; certainly, that is something that keeps the people of Plymouth connected, and is a part of making life feel more and more abundant.

And the early church devoted themselves to "fellowship." One cannot be a faithful person by one's self; they knew that as well as we do. Zoom coffee hours were not a possibility; still, they developed relationships with others in the body, and they cultivated relationships with those who were not yet a part of the body. They served a relational God, as do we. They broke bread together; most likely, this refers to the Lord's Supper, rather than other meals -- and yet, as they grew in their faith, one meal no doubt reminded them of the other.

We are told that in the early church, everyone shared what they had with everyone else. Likely we don't share everything that we have -- and when there is a need and that need is made known, sharing happens. And it happens not only within this body -- it happens in our neighborhoods and in this county and around the world. I know that you all have a relationship with the Columbia Pacific Food Bank. Tuesday afternoon, I was part of a meeting where we approved sending \$419.33 to each of 29 churches in our Presbytery who had applied for funds for feeding programs -- and Plymouth was one that applied! Many thanks to those here who worked on the application; and to those who help with the Food Bank; the money may already be here, and will be given to the Columbia Pacific Food Bank. And you are helping with a Habitat house. I'll be learning more in the next few months about other involvements you have that lead to life abundant for others, as well as for you. During this virus, different opportunities have been coming our ways than any of us could ever have imagined. Our needs are different now -- we can hardly wait until we can go out to lunch with a friend, or: until we can be in the same room as our children or grandchildren! The first time that we had a zoom coffee hour, it was so much fun to watch each of your faces as you saw each of everyone else's faces for the first time in a while! Of course, right now, fellowship needs to be done differently. But you have been so good at it for so long that just calling for physical distance doesn't mean that you have isolated yourselves from others in this body. There are phones, there is email -- and you use them! And life after a good conversation is a more abundant life.

In these days, our need for the abundant life offered us by our God is even more apparent. And we are increasingly aware of the need for each of us to be a part of that abundant life for those around us. Notice how you are a part of that; notice how others are a part of it for you; and thank God that each of us, each of everyone is a part of the divine plan. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.