

Easter 4, 5.3.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

“An Abundant Life”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, and today is often called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” As the Good Shepherd, Jesus reveals his care and love for his flock who are always in danger of being killed by the one Jesus calls “the thief.” Jesus says, “*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” It is remarkable to me that on this Sunday, in the midst of a global pandemic, Jesus the Good Shepherd, comes to us with a voice of life in the midst of death, a voice of abundance in the midst of fear and want.

Compared with many places in the world, we live in a very affluent and abundant society. Compared with many places in the world, we are blessed with choices and the freedom to make them. We are surrounded by material and technological abundance of an unparalleled nature, and we rarely want for anything. Yet we also live in a world of remarkable poverty and inequality. Jesus tells us that he has come so that all people “*may have life, and have it abundantly.*” Jesus’ words are in clear contrast to the world’s message of seeking material abundance at the expense of others.

Jesus’ message about abundance and protecting the sheep are not to be confused with the American “Gospel of Prosperity” or “Gospel of Wealth.” The abundance the Jesus is talking about has nothing to do with material gain. The word “abundance” (περισσός) Jesus uses means “beyond what is anticipated, exceeding expectation, exceeding the expected limit.” Jesus is talking about grace. God’s grace always exceeds our expectations. God’s grace is always overflowing in its abundance. There is never a supply problem with God’s grace. What is at issue is, are we open to receiving God’s abundant grace? Do we anticipate receiving God’s abundant grace every day?

Jesus says that the sheep hear his voice and follow him. He says that they will not follow other voices. The Good Shepherd is about leadership. I think even Jesus might be surprised by how many voices seek our attention today. Many voices seek our loyalty and allegiance. Who should we follow? The voice of the Good Shepherd comes only from Jesus, yet we can hear his voice through others who have been also listening to and seeking to follow the Good Shepherd’s voice.

If you have been out shopping recently, perhaps you haven’t always been able to find everything

on your shopping list. The shelves for some items are still often bare. There has been want and a scarcity of some items. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a local and global chain of manufacturing, supply and distribution have been disrupted and some items are not always available. Further, some items may be hard to find because people have been, and still are hoarding things. The economic situation is hard in this country and in many places around the world. Much of our current situation is related to the pandemic revealing how interrelated our global economy really is. It is easy to understand how a sense of abundance and confidence has been shaken in our world. When people begin to hoard out of fear for the future, we also begin to experience scarcity – a scarcity of hope. Like a virus, fear spreads throughout the population causing uncertainty about the present and the about the future.

Of course, the truth is that we always live between life and death, between abundance and loss. Though we don't usually dwell excessively on it, we are always living between hope and doubt about the future. Jesus reminds us today that he is the Good Shepherd who walks with us and leads us during every chapter in our lives. In times of both material abundance and poverty, the grace of Jesus is always abundant and life giving. In sickness and and in health, in life and in death, God's grace and love are always overflowing. This is the abundant nature of God's grace.

Psalm 23 begins with words of abundance and faith: "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*" We shall not want for anything because God is with us. Perhaps we have heard the words of Psalm 23 so many times that we treat them lightly. However, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,*" reveals an unshakable faith that no matter the circumstances of life, the one who walks with the Good Shepherd shall never be in want. Jesus the Good Shepherd leads, inspires, challenges, and protects us throughout our lives – but we must listen to his voice.

Psalm 23 reminds us that the Good Shepherd leads us to green pastures and still waters where we are restored. He leads us in paths of righteousness so that in times of difficult ethical decision, we are able to make good choices. Even in the darkest moments of human life - in temptation, fear, anxiety and depression - we do not fear evil or the thief who breaks in to destroy us; rather, we walk with confident faith because the Good Shepherd is with us. Psalm 23 is probably well-loved because it describes the all of the challenges that humanity faces throughout a lifetime.

This pandemic has taught us that our modernity and material abundance have not changed our human frailty. The last verse of Psalm 23 reads, "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*" That verb "follow" as in "follow me all the days of my life" really means "to

pursue.” God’s *goodness and mercy pursue us throughout our lifetimes.*” We can be sure that when we turn around God will be there. The goodness and mercy of God are relentless because the thief always seeks to kill and destroy. The Good Shepherd’s abundance always exceed our expectations. The question before us today is do we notice and rely upon God’s abundance every day?

The reading from Acts today tells us how the early Christian community lived and cared for one another. They shared from their abundance with one another and with those who were in need. Acts reads, *“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”* This sounds a lot like this congregation: during this pandemic, St. Mark’s Soup Kitchen continues to distribute bag lunches every Thursday. We continue to collect and donate food to the ecumenical food pantry Loaves and Fishes for the hungry in our community. Like the Book of Acts, we seek to share our abundance with others who were in need. Having been blessed, we seek to use our blessings for others. *“And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”*

Lately, our media driven conversations have been about wanting return to normal, to “open society up,” but we are also probably a bit afraid of the risks involved. We want life to return to “normal,” but we also are aware of the risks involved because, as of yet, there is no cure or effective treatment for this illness other than staying apart.

The reading from 1 Peter, encourages us, *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.”* God continues to give abundantly in the midst of suffering. God never hoards God’s abundance. In our isolation, in our fears, God’s grace transforms us so we can imitate the sufferings of God. God always shares grace that transforms us from people of fear into people of hope. God’s love and grace are the opposite of the hoarding mentality. Grace is never hoarded. God gives it away.

We cannot yet see where the Good Shepherd is leading us, and our world. We know it will be a place of restoration and wholeness. The Good Shepherd invites us to follow. Listen for his voice. The Good shepherd invites us to give out of our abundance so that others may also have life and abundance. Listen for his voice. The Good Shepherd walks with us in the darkest valleys of this pandemic so that we might be living signs of life and hope for others. Open your hearts again and listen for the Shepherd’s voice. With the Good Shepherd, we will always have an abundant life – more than enough to share with others. Amen.