

Abundant Life

John 10:1-10; 1 Peter 2:24-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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When I sat down to look at this week's lectionary readings, the central theme or metaphor that leaps out of was that of the shepherd.

The OT reading is the well-known and loved twenty-third Psalm—"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." The epistle from 1 Peter, which we heard the end of, talks about returning to Christ, "the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

And of course, the gospel reading we just heard John 10 is saturated with imagery of sheep and shepherds. If we would have read a bit further, we would have come across Jesus' most explicit words about how he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

I intended to talk mainly about sheep and shepherds today. But as I continued to ponder and pray about this passage throughout the week, I kept coming back one verse. The verse our gospel reading this morning ended with. The words of Jesus:

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

This is what I have been thinking about all week. Abundant life. What is it? How do we get it? Where do we see it? Where do we see its absence?

Every morning, I have a fairly predictable routine when it comes to the news. I visit a handful of sites from mainstream media and other sites that I have come to appreciate over the years, and I just open anything that looks potentially interesting in a new browser tab to read once I'm done my initial scan.

By the time I'm done, I'll sometimes have ten or more tabs open across the top of my browser.

It's a pretty terrible strategy. From what I've read, it's the digital equivalent of the phrase "cluttered desk, cluttered mind." Probably not the sort of thing that would contribute to an abundant life. I guess I'll need to work on that.

At any rate, at one point on Friday, as I was pondering Jesus' words about abundant life, I had a glance at the tabs I had open, the articles that I had already read or distractedly skimmed or was planning to read.

There was an article from *The New York Times* where the writers argued that it's ok to steal as long as it's from rich corporations. It was an article shot through with bad arguments, self-justification, and moral confusion.

Next was an article from *The Atlantic* where the writer was reflecting on her participation in an initiative called a "Month Offline." She had signed up for an experiment with a bunch of other (mostly younger) people who were fed up with their reliance upon/addiction to smartphones and social media. The idea is, you go a month with a flip phone and no social media, and you see how it affects your mental health.

These kinds of initiatives are springing up everywhere these days and for obvious reasons. We don't like what our technology is doing to us, particularly our kids. Just this morning, I saw that the province of Manitoba announced it will be banning youth from using social media and AI chatbots (how? who knows.. but hard not to appreciate the idea).

(Interestingly, Forbes Magazine recently released its list of the World's Happiest Countries. For the first time, none of the top ten were English-speaking countries and the decline of countries like Canada [25th] and the USA [23rd] was attributed at least in part to heavy social media use.)

Then there was an article called "Japan's bleak vision of the future." Japan's fertility rate hit a record low in 2024. And with the exception of Israel, all countries in the developed world now have a fertility rate below 2.1 children per woman — the level required to maintain a stable population.

Japan's fertility rate dropped below replacement level in 1974, before any other country. This means that the consequences of low fertility — a rapidly ageing society and a shrinking population, pervasive loneliness, deep uneasiness about the future — are

becoming apparent in Japan before they do anywhere else. So, what's happening in Japan may be a preview of what's coming for us.

Next tab over was a piece in *The Globe & Mail* called "How young women are radicalized into hating men." It talked about the ugliness of online dating culture, a widening education gap between women and men, the toxicity of social media, and a general inability for young men and women to form healthy relationships.

(None of it seemed conducive to making a dent in the fertility crisis.)

Two more. First was a transcript of an interview with a young adult who had left their faith behind. It was sent to me by an ex-Christian friend who carries a lot of resentment toward the church and whose story would have similarities with the interview.

It was part of a weeks-long conversation I've been having with him about losing community when you lose your faith, about anger and hypocrisy and loneliness and many other things besides.

Finally, there was one more article in *The Globe & Mail* by Ian Brown called "Midlife isn't a crisis, it's a compression." The general idea was that the decade roughly between 45-55 can be a time when pressures come at you from all directions and from a wide variety of sources.

I clicked on this one for "research purposes." You know, in case I came across someone who might find it useful 😊.

That was the last tab open in my browser. I looked down at my bible and looked at Jesus' words again. *Abundant life*.

I thought about my morning reading.

- The erosion of moral norms.
- A fertility and relationship crisis speaks of a lack of trust and suspicion of one another, to say nothing of the absence of a hopeful view of a future worth bringing children into.
- A deeply unhealthy digital context where everyone's reckoning with the destruction unleashed by smartphones and social media.

- The spiritual and relational dislocation experienced by so many when they walk away from faith and community but have no idea what to replace it with.
- General absence of peace amid the pressures and strains of life.

Now, all of this could be just a feature of what I happened to click on Friday morning. I'm sure there are more optimistic things I could have been reading! Naomi watches a lot of videos about puppies—maybe I should try this 😊

But at least on this Friday morning, it all seemed interconnected and pointed to a vague kind of cultural despair. It seemed hopeless, lonely, angry, resigned, lost, stressed, unmoored, perpetually distracted, waiting to be entertained or provoked or... something.

It felt like as a culture, we're not sure about that life is good or that human flourishing is even worth pursuing.

At the very least, none of my reading sounded anything like “abundant life.”

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Well, that's perhaps a bit of a grim reminder about what abundant life *isn't*. What is it?

What makes a life “abundant.” If I someone were to ask you, what does an abundant life look like, what would you say? I suspect most of us would point to:

- having our basic needs met (food, clothing, shelter); maybe the freedom to pursue hobbies, travel, etc.
- physical health
- strong, supportive relationships
- thick communities that can support us, that we can share with and learn from on the journey of life
- a sense of meaning and purpose
- a life where we attend to what matters, where we are present with and for others, instead of being led around by our devices and their algorithms
- a life where we are connected to creation instead of staring at screens
- to feel like we are known and loved for who we are
- a connection to the God who made us and loves us.

You might add other things to the list. Overall, I think we know that an abundant life is one where we flourish, where we live genuinely human lives as we were created to do.

So, why do Jesus' words about "abundant life" come in the context of all this talk about sheep and shepherds?

Here I want to point out something that is as simple and obvious as it is profound.

Sheep need help in knowing where to go. They are born followers. They need a shepherd.

This is not a metaphor that necessarily flatters us. But if we are honest, we must acknowledge that we do not always naturally pursue the abundant life we were created for.

We chase the smaller things that we think will make life worth living like money and possessions and comfort and ease and distraction even though we know that these things will not deliver on what they promise.

I read an interview with the actor Bob Odenkirk yesterday (star of shows like *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*). The interviewer was asking him about happiness and where it's found. At one point, they suggested maybe people pursue wealth because it's easier than pursuing happiness, to which Odenkirk responded:

Most people think being a millionaire is what makes you happy, but go talk to a millionaire.

It's worth noting that Odenkirk is a millionaire.

We listen to the wrong voices—and there are many, many voices out there:

- Voices trying to manipulate us and sell us things
- Voices trying to convince us that our value lies in accumulating influence or status
- Voices trying to hijack our attention, distracting and dividing us
- Voices eager to give us an enemy to define ourselves against
- Voices telling us that we are only as useful as what we produce
- Voices telling us that we deserve everything that we want

We can choose to listen to these voices. Many of us do. But these are the voices that come to kill, steal and destroy. Pursuing them leads to living lesser lives than the abundance we were created for.

Or we can choose to listen to the voice of Jesus who tells us who we are and what we were made for.

It's fascinating to me that this passage from John 10 that we heard today comes in the broader context of Jesus' healing of a man born blind on the Sabbath and of the Pharisees' reaction to it.

The story starts with Jesus disciples asking him who sinned, the blind man or his parents, that he was born blind. Jesus says neither. This is an opportunity for God to work in the world. This is a chance for the light of the world to shine brightly in the darkness.

Jesus heals the man born blind. The Pharisees are upset because he has violated the Sabbath. He is obviously a sinner.

They interrogate the blind man and his parents about this healing, demanding some kind of explanation that will preserve their categories. They don't get it.

Eventually, the Pharisees get so exasperated that they throw the man who was healed of his blindness out of the temple. The scene would be comical were it not so sad.

Light and life have come where there was darkness. And the Pharisees are upset because it happened on the wrong day of the week.

Jesus hears that the man has been thrown out of the temple. He reveals his identity to the man born blind. And he says, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (John 9:39).

The Pharisees perceive who he is speaking about. "What, are we blind, too?"

And in response to all this, Jesus talks about the good shepherd who knows and loves his sheep, and thieves and robbers who do not have the best interests of the sheep in mind, and ultimately about how he will lay down his life for the sheep.

This whole section is a response to the Pharisees. He is calling them blind guides, bad shepherds, thieves, robbers. Why? Because they can't celebrate life when it makes an unexpected appearance.

They can't (or won't see). And because they think they can, Jesus says they are blind.

The Good Shepherd has come to bring life, healing, hope, wholeness.

This doesn't mean that Jesus has come that we will have comfortable lives full of material blessings, and no suffering.

Abundant life is not a synonym for a life of comfort and ease. It was not so for Jesus and his first followers, and it will not be so for us.

Jesus had few possessions, he wasn't married, he had no children and would have checked few of the boxes for the kind of life that most of strive for (if only implicitly). Yet there has never been someone as fully alive, fully human as him.

Jesus teaches us what love and hope look like. Jesus teaches us that we were made for God and for each other, not for ourselves.

Jesus teaches us that lives of love are abundant lives.

The other voices only kill and steal and destroy. They never deliver what they promise. They leave us chasing shadows, wracked with guilt over all that we can't accomplish, anxious about how we're not measuring up to others, angry over all the suffering that we cannot solve.

Jesus wants to show us what and how to see.

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I want to end with the short portion from the 1 Peter reading this morning.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

I've said a lot about what an abundant life is or isn't this morning. I want to add one more thing: an abundant life is one that acknowledges human sin and frailty and knows where to go with these things.

We all, like sheep have gone, are going, will go astray from time to time. We long for the lives we were created for, but we can't secure them for ourselves.

If an abundant life is something that we must achieve on our own, we are in big trouble.

The gospel is never, "Here is an agenda to go out and construct the life you've always wanted."

The gospel is always, "Here is what the love of God, in Christ, has done for you and for the world. Live freely and fully into this life."

An abundant life is one in which we can rest in what God, in Christ, has accomplished *for* us. We have been set free. Healed. Forgiven. We are not defined by our failures. Our suffering is never the final word. Death is the doorway to eternal life.

Our souls have a shepherd. A guardian. They are protected, by the One whose wounds are the source of healing for the world.

Ultimately, abundant life is a gift, not an achievement. It is something offered to us, if we will receive it.

May God help us to admit our blindness so that we can see. May God help us to return, again and again and again, to our Good Shepherd, the Guardian of our souls.

Amen.

