

Sunday April 21st, 2024

Easter IV

John 10:11-18

“It’s All Good with Jesus”

I found the meaning of life. It’s on page 937 in the dictionary between the words lie and lifeboat.

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’m pretty sure that at some level they are always with us. And we don’t 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 our busyness. We are trying to show that our life does matter and that we make a difference.

It’s often the unstated, maybe even the unknown reason, why, especially when we are young and developing our careers, we work so hard. We’ve got to prove ourselves, we’ve got to acquire, we’ve 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. And we’ve 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’ve done and whether we’ve made a difference in this world.

I don’t know how many times I’ve been to the nursing home, and I’ve heard someone say, “I’m just ready to go. I don’t want to be here; I don’t understand what God is doing. Why am I still here?” I can’t help but wonder if what they are really asking is whether their life matters and what difference does it make to others. Are they of value?

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.

Jesus’ statement about bringing abundant life is the hinge between those two halves. Last year at Easter time we heard the first half, Jesus’ statement about bringing abundant life was the conclusion. It was the ending point. Abundant life is the goal. Today his statement about abundant life is the beginning. It’s his purpose statement. It underlies everything he will say today.

“I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly.” That sets the tone for his telling of today’s story about the good shepherd, the hired hand, the sheep, and the wolf. 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?

And I’m not talking about abundance in terms of quantity. It is not a quantity. Abundance is a quality of life. It’s 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 didn’t do what we thought it would.

Sunday April 21st, 2024
Easter IV

It didn't fill us up. It didn't fulfill. It didn't 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's good, true, and beautiful in this world. It's not so much about getting something we don't have, but living more fully into what is already present. So that abundance is love that leads to love. It's joy that leads to joy. It's peace that leads to peace. It's kindness that leads to kindness.

It's 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?

When you hear about the good shepherd, who do you think of? Jesus. Yes, that's 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 don't ask those 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 as a companion and 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 couldn't 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. Here's the thing. 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's always about getting to that place of abundance.

But it's not as if abundance wasn't already there. It's 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.

Sunday April 21st, 2024
Easter IV

I'm betting every one of you has shepherded someone else and that there have been times in your life when someone else shepherded you. 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's how it is supposed to work. And that's right. I've 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've all got them. We've all entrusted those things into the hands and the life of another. And we've 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're a sheep asking for your shepherd guidance. Or you go to someone and say, "I don't know what to do with my kid," 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's something about sheep that is abundant. It's in their vulnerability, their honesty, and the way they hope. They are full and whole and life giving. It's why they matter, why we care for them. It's why we receive that entrustment with great respect and honor. Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the hired hand. The hired hand, 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 hand, however, they are just the means. The hired hand punches the clock 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. And 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 on her or him. Hired hands stay only as long as the wages are good. The hired hand either refuses to see or can't see, the abundance that's already there. She or he trades abundance for wages. In what ways have you experienced the hired hand in your life?

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.

Sunday April 21st, 2024

Easter IV

Wolves come in all sorts of shapes and sizes in our world today. Sometimes it's the wolf of busyness, the wolf of achievement, the wolf of needing approval, or the wolf of having to be right and in control. And 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?

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's 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's 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's been lost and carried away. What's abandoned. It is not as if the abundance was never there or can never be regained again. It's just gotten lost, scattered, forgotten.

What do you see when you look through these windows on your life? Where's 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 can't 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'm not offering these four images as answers but simply as invitations to open our eyes and see what is. That's all that Jesus is really doing with this story. He isn't giving any answers either.

He 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 gospel 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 gospel, 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's happening? Do you see the sequence? Restored sight, the good shepherd, new life.

Jesus is saying that we've got to open your eyes, we've got to see, we've got to look at these images 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've 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've been, and experiences that we've had.

Sunday April 21st, 2024

Easter IV

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 gospel into good characters and bad characters. Let's not do that. Let's 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's his starting point and it's his goal. Abundant life is Jesus' promise to each of us.