

THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

Abundant Life

A prompting offered by Ruth Hopkins, *Seminary Intern*
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

John 10: 7-18

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

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

John 10:10

It is Good Shepherd Sunday, and as I was preparing this week, I found lots and lots of information about sheep and sheep herding, most of which I will spare you.

Instead, I would like to talk about not just the Good Shepherd of the story, but the hired hand as well. He tends to get lost; it is the character we don't remember. We remember Jesus, of course, the sheep, the green pastures – not the hired hand. But in those images of the Good Shepherd and the hired hand, Jesus gives us two distinct ways of living and being with God and each other.

First let us look at the hired hand, here we have a guy, I am assuming it is a guy, that does not own the sheep, and does not care. He runs away when the wolf comes by. So what if a sheep is lost, as long as he gets paid. He might not even be with the same flock tomorrow. The hired hand sits on a shady hillside, half paying attention, half dreaming, waiting for his work to end so he can go home and eat his dinner. His operational mode could be described as half way. Doing just the bare minimum for his wage.

The Good Shepherd, on the other hand, knows the sheep, and they know him. The word "good" here is better translated as model. The Model Shepherd, the best kind of shepherd. This shepherd risks it all for the sheep, because he loves them. He has his eyes on the sheep, travels over sharp rocks in every kind of weather to retrieve them, is active, and alert. He knows which ones are likely to stray, and which ones have their lambs with them. His operational mode could be described as full on.

So who's got the more abundant life?

If you think the hired hand does, well, I would have to argue with you. While it sounds nice in theory to sit on a hillside, with no care in the world, he is not really being what he was hired to be – a shepherd. He

does not mourn if he loses a sheep, and he doesn't rejoice when a lamb is born. He has put nothing of himself in the job, not even his full attention.

Whereas the Good Shepherd, the Model Shepherd, well, he is the epitome of shepherding. He is fully what he was hired to be – a shepherd, and a good one. He worries over the frail lambs, names his sheep, and laughs at their play. He enjoys a beautiful day on the hillside – and is in tune with the seasons. He has invested himself in the job, in life itself – and it shows in the way he loves and cares for his sheep.

And how do we live? In truth, there are times when we act and relate more like hired hands, putting our time in until the boss lets us go home. Times when it seems that there are other people, closer to the issues, that can do the heavy lifting. We listen with half of our ears, but do not hear, we skim the words, but do not understand, we are in one place, but dream of being in another. Let me be clear, I am not saying all work and no play. I am talking abundant life. Where is that abundant life?

Mary Oliver reflects on abundant life in her poem "The Summer Day"

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean--
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

I certainly did not know what I was going to do with my wild and precious life until fairly recently. It was not very wild to me. It was quite boring. My time was full, full of worry, and stewing over what to do with my life. When I started hearing the call to seminary, I ignored it quite well. I was on the sidelines of life, yet wondered why life seemed to be passing me by. I was living life in my head, while my body was sitting on the couch. Going to seminary, not knowing what would be, spending all that money! It seemed reckless, and extravagant. Finally there was nothing left to do but take one step, that is all that was required, just one step toward seminary. I made an appointment to visit the campus of United, and I am still there. All that serious stewing made no difference until I decided to live instead of think. All of my what ifs meant nothing because I was not ready to pour myself into them and live them out.

I am reading a great book called *The Wisdom Jesus* by Cynthia Bourgeault. In it she claims Jesus is really a wisdom teacher – making comparisons and leaving us puzzling over them. She also says that to live a life like Jesus, one that leads to abundant life – we need to empty ourselves.

Jesus only had one "operational mode". Everything he did, he did by self-emptying. In whatever life circumstance, Jesus always responded with the same motion of self-emptying – or to put it another way, of the same motion of descent: going lower, taking the lower place, not the higher.¹

She goes on to say that while many religious disciplines involve fasting, prayer, and meditation, there is another path.

A more reckless path and extravagant path, which is attained not through storing up .. energy or concentrating the life force, but through throwing it all away – or giving it all away. The.. point is reached not through the concentration of being but through the free squandering of it; not through

¹ Bourgeault, pg.64.

acquisition or attainment but through self-emptying; not through 'up' but through 'down.' This is the ..path that Jesus introduced into the consciousness of the West.²

When we think of the religious life – we don't think of words like reckless, or extravagant. But perhaps we should. Don't get me wrong – I don't for one moment believe that Jesus wants us to pile up riches and throw money around and generally be obnoxious. But I do think that part of living as a follower of Jesus is about being fully engaged in life, in the world, in all that we do, to the best of our ability. Owning our weaknesses, and celebrating our humanness. Certainly we could listen to our friends and families better, to hear what might be behind the words. Certainly we could rejoice in the truly extravagant gift of each day – its promise and potential. Certainly we could love recklessly – as if there were no end to love's supply. And we would be right.

Instead of going through life as hired hands, putting in our time at worship, in life, letting each day drift away, not really feeling pleasure or pain, we could be shepherds, alert and watchful for God's presence in the world and in each other. We could kneel in the grass, be idle, not in laziness, but in blessedness. We could say yes to the pleasure and pain, trusting God will shepherd us. This is abundant life! Abundant by definition. It is wonderful to be alive!

Instead of being just a bunch of individuals sitting under the same roof in Centerville, we could truly be a part of each other, part of the body of Christ. Not as hired hands, half caring, half listening, but full on, engaged with each other, engaged with the world. Emptying our selves to each other and to our community.

What will you choose? In all that you do, in all that you are, you have a choice to be a hired hand, or good shepherd. You can live half asleep, on the sidelines, loving grudgingly, and have half a life. You can live awake, alert, in the game fully, loving recklessly and wildly, and have abundant life. Choose wisely.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

² Bourgeault, pg. 66.