

4 Easter A May 3, 2020
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The Question of the Day
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Jesus said, I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. – John 10:10

One morning not long ago - although it certainly feels like it happened a long time ago because of all the changes that have happened since mid-March in response to the covid-19 pandemic – I was sitting at a table in our coffee shop CrossRoads Café, enjoying a delicious cup of coffee, when a gentleman walked in, ordered an Americano, and looked over at the sign on the side of the counter explaining CrossRoads Café as a ministry of Church of the Good Shepherd. He took a while to read that sign, then asked the manager a question. It was a question that caught my attention. It was a question I was surprised to hear. Because I assumed it was a question that didn't need to be asked. Turns out my assumption was wrong. Even our wonderful, intelligent manager couldn't answer the question.

That made me realize it is a very good question for today, Good Shepherd Sunday, the 4th Sunday in the Season of Easter. The question the gentleman asked was: "Who is the Good Shepherd?"

For those of us who already know the answer, perhaps we need to remember there are many people who don't know, who may have not read the Bible, who may not understand Biblical language or references. And we need to be careful about our assumptions about our neighbors and neighborhood, even in assuming they recognize or understand what the name of our parish means.

I answered the gentleman, who certainly came across as well-read and intelligent, that the Good Shepherd is how Jesus describe himself in the Gospels. In fact, the sentence immediately following the one I quoted at the beginning of this sermon is Jesus saying, "I am the Good Shepherd." I also explained the reason Jesus used that term to describe himself is because good shepherd imagery has deep scriptural roots and is featured prominently throughout the Old Testament. It was a way of speaking about the preferred relationship between a leader and their people, one characterized by showing care for people like a good shepherd cares for their sheep. It was the job of many of the Israelites' most beloved Biblical leaders including Moses and King David. It is the theme of one of the most well-loved psalms in the Bible, Psalm 23 that begins, "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and goes on to describe a relationship with God that is life-giving and trusting. In calling himself The Good Shepherd, Jesus is calling on that scriptural imagery of the ideal relationship of a leader and their people: one that is life-giving and worthy of trust. And like in Psalm

23, it is the image Jesus wanted people to associate with their relationship to God. By calling himself the Good Shepherd Jesus was saying he is the true leader or king or Messiah because his relationship with God and God's People is one of life-giving and redeeming love.

By calling our parish "Church of the Good Shepherd", we are saying who we are: followers of Jesus and when we are at our best, we embody the life-giving love of God in Christ in our worship and ministries.

Today, on the Sunday that shares our name, we are reminded of this because all the scripture passages assigned for the day make reference to the shepherd imagery in the Old and New Testaments; even today's Gospel reading where Jesus refers to himself as the gate for the sheep to move through to access the good, green pasture lands. Jesus also mentioned thieves and strangers who do not know the sheep, don't value them and only see them as a means to an end. While scholars and commentators are not sure if Jesus was referring to any specific people or group of people, it is perhaps not too hard for us to relate to or imagine what Jesus is talking about.

Perhaps there are times when we have felt taken advantage of or have taken advantage of someone. Perhaps we can relate to feeling like a number instead of a person, valued for what or how much we produce instead of who we are, or are guilty of forgetting when numbers really represent individual human beings with hopes, dreams, broken hearts, fears, and lives. Jesus knew there are many people who use their voices to try to convince others to follow them only to profit from them, who want to sell us something, or who want our information for their own benefit. I don't know about you, but since this pandemic began, I have been bombarded with emails from companies and consultants I've never heard of trying to scare me into believing if I don't buy what they are selling our church is going to die. My social media feeds are full of colleagues telling me if I don't do what they are doing I'm going to lose attendance, membership, and funds. I've seen a lot of competition out there to "win" this pandemic, to be the best videographer, the best asker for money, the best snatcher of sheep from other flocks. That's the unique opportunity of this pandemic, these voices tell me, and they assure me I don't want to miss out on my chance to grab as much as I can.

But those sound like the voices Jesus cautioned against in today's Gospel. Those voices sound fearful and anxious; preaching a gospel of scarcity, where there never was enough people or money for all the churches in the world and this is a good opportunity to cull the herd, as it were. They certainly don't match the words of Jesus who said he came that we might have life abundantly.

Practices like consumerism can misinterpret the words of Jesus to mean he came that we might have a life of a lot of money and a lot of stuff. But abundance doesn't mean a lot. As those who felt it necessary during this covid-19 pandemic to hoard important essentials like toilet paper, hand sanitizer, soap, or food might be discovering as time goes on and all that stuff doesn't really calm their fears or make them feel less anxious. Taking more than your fair share in order to prevent others from having those essential things won't bring anyone peace because that is not what abundant life is.

One of the best examples I can give to help us better understand what Jesus is talking about when he said he came to give us life in abundance is the Tardis from *Doctor Who*, the BBC science fiction television show about an alien called The Doctor who travels through space and time. For those unfamiliar with the show, the Tardis is The Doctor's ship that travels anywhere through space and time. The Tardis is supposed to blend into its surroundings, but The Doctor's ship is broken, so it always looks like a blue police box from Great Britain. As fans of *Doctor Who* know well, what looks like a small blue box on the outside is much, much bigger on the inside. Until recently, that characteristic of the Tardis was explained as "Time Lord Technology". But an episode of *Doctor Who* written by Neil Gaiman called "The Doctor's Wife" gave it a deeper, more theological meaning. When the Tardis' matrix was forcibly removed from the iconic blue box and put into a woman, the Tardis – who is sentient- was able to learn about humanity from the inside out. At one point in the episode she asked The Doctor, "Are all people like this?" "Like what?" The Doctor replied. And the Tardis asked another powerful question, "So much bigger on the inside?"

It took the Tardis almost the whole episode to find the right word to clarify her question. It was a word she described as "big, complicated, and sad." And the word was: *alive*. Being bigger on the inside wasn't about the many rooms the Tardis has, or the stuff in those rooms, being bigger on the inside is being alive. Being alive is more than respiration, reproducing, and consuming. That is survival. Even the Covid-19 virus can do that.

Being bigger on the inside is about being alive: creating art, music, stories, songs, mathematics; being alive is creating, cultivating and nurturing relationships, its giving love and receiving love, its caring about something larger than yourself. It's being vulnerable, curious, it's learning, growing, maturing, discovering and sharing discoveries. It's delighting in beauty; its joy in connecting to the world and other people and God. Being alive means suffering at times, and our faith helps us trust that suffering can help us learn to be compassionate, sympathetic, empathic, and merciful. Being alive is about sacrificing for something larger than yourself, like our graduating class of 2020 had to sacrifice their graduation ceremonies and parties for the well-being of others. Being alive is experiencing and grieving loss, it's letting your heart be

broken, and rising again to love, create, learn, give, and to let God redeem those losses. That is what Jesus was talking about when he said he came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. He freed us from fear of death so that we can engage in the wondrous, complex, joyous, sad, redeemable mystery that is life.

Because our parish's name is Church of the Good Shepherd, today is usually a day when we celebrate our ministries as well as our name sake. Which means it is particularly painful not to be together in-person today. I am certainly feeling that pain. Yet even though we are a part, we can still celebrate that we are apart of Church of the Good Shepherd today. Since it's a different kind of time, we can celebrate differently by reflecting on the observation I made not long ago. That like assuming the Tardis is small because of its outward appearance, we have to be careful not to assume everyone knows who the Good Shepherd is when they see the sign for our parish. And we can wonder how we can show them who the Good Shepherd is. This is hard right now, because we can't open CrossRoads Café, nor serve Wednesday Free Lunch, or even gather together for worship. But this doesn't mean we stop listening for the voice of abundant life calling to us even in the midst of the cacophony of noise around us speaking of fear, anxiety and scarcity. Voices that try to convince the future is going to look like the present. We can tell those voices to keep it down. We know the future can be so much better. One way to get there is to live the life Jesus came to bring us by checking in with each other. To keep giving as much as we can, that is so appreciated. We can share what we have instead of competing against others, support each other individually and other parishes as best we can, we can pray for each other and the whole church. And we can try to learn, to explore, and let what we learn influence how we follow our Good Shepherd who guides us even in this pandemic through right pathways for his name's sake, trusting he will see us through and the world will see the Good Shepherd through us.

Let us pray: The God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep, through the everlasting covenant: Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight; through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.