

## Sermon

Have you ever been sitting watching TV completely content with what you're doing, not hungry or not feeling any particular needs and then all of a sudden that big juicy hamburger comes on the screen or that cheesy pepperoni pizza and the next thing you know your mouth is salivating and a burger or a pizza sure sounds good. And now that we can order food so easily from our phones, it sure is tempting to give in to every whim and desire we feel. One of the topics that we discussed in a class on cultural hermeneutics in seminary was desire. We discussed what it is like to live in a relatively wealthy country where food, clothing and stuff in general can be bought for pretty cheap. Even though the middle class is shrinking many of us can afford to have our basic needs met and well beyond. But for our capitalistic materialistic economy to even work we have to have people buying more stuff all the time. So how do you market to people who already have all of their basic needs met and then some? For some their needs are so overwhelmingly met already, materialistically speaking, that the only thing left to desire is desire itself. So you see in an ad a beautiful man or woman driving the sleek fast car and you desire to be that person driving that car. And the advertisers know that they can put these thoughts in your head by showing you these images over and over again. So even though you already have a perfectly functioning car,

now you find yourself desiring better car so that you can be you better person. For those in this congregation who have for years been committed to living simply and exercising the demon of materialism out of our lives you can pretty easily spot these kinds of marketing gimmicks to create desire in you. Perhaps we know that abundant living isn't about fulfilling desire for the sake of fulfilling desire.

I was also recalling a story that a friend of mine told me. She is a Christian woman and at one point was really wanting to move into a condo because as a single woman with no children she knew that taking care of a house and property by herself was only going to get harder. Her realtor told her that God wanted an abundant life for her and part of that would be borrowing the maximum amount that the bank would allow in order to get the nicest biggest condo that was available. When she told me this I was really angry at the realtor. How is being mortgaged to the hilt and strapped for cash while living in a much bigger condo than a single person needs abundant life? This friend works in the RV industry and is constantly at the mercy of the economy and cannot count on regular income year after year after year because of the fluctuations in the RV industry. So if she had followed his advice, right now this year after having had weeks and weeks of shut down and then only working three days a week and now maybe four days a

week how abundant is her life feeling if she's worried about paying her mortgage and her association fees?

The John 10: 10 promise of Jesus that he has come to give life and to give it abundantly has been so misused in our culture where greed, attachment to stuff, and the constant influence to need or desire more always more. So what is the abundant life that Jesus is talking about here?

Let's think about what life was like in 1st century Palestine. I read some years ago that about 85% of people at that time lived in what we would today call poverty. The majority of people lived hand to mouth and barely scratched out a living to meet their basic needs. Lifestyles of luxury were reserved for the very few who held power and status. So what does it mean when Jesus is talking about abundant life to people who will never have more than their most basic physical needs met? It makes me think that abundant life has nothing to do with how much stuff you have.

I do think that God cares and wants all people to have enough to live, that no one should be homeless or food insecure, or have no clean water available, or will not be able to afford adequate clothing for the climate in which they live.

Perhaps again in order to help us understand what abundant life means when Jesus says it in this context, we can also contrast it with what Jesus says is not life giving. He talks about the thief and bandits who want to have illegitimate access to the sheep who sneak around, and their aim is to steal and to kill and to destroy. He does not identify who these thieves, bandits and strangers are, but just says it is those who came before him, who tried to get people to believe that they were the gate, the great protector, the one who would lead them. Apparently they were found out to be nothing but thieves and bandits who take what is not theirs, and use those sheep for their own gain, perhaps to eat them, or to sell them, and sometimes people steal just for the joy of stealing because it meets some need in a twisted way. When you're being used and abused for someone else's gain or because it meets their need in a twisted way that is the opposite of life-giving to you, it feels terrible.

Jesus claims here to be that safe gate, and in the 1 Peter passage he is the Shepherd, the guardian of our souls. He's checking out people's ID's before he lets them in and out. When he lets the sheep out to find pasture and water, he doesn't just let them out and abandon them, but he says that he leads them by his voice and his sheep know his voice. So he is with them, leading them and caring for them.

So the abundant life in contrast to what the thieves and bandits offer, is a life lived in Jesus and through Jesus. Willard Swartley says that “Jesus 's gift of life is rooted in the sheep- shepherd relationship and cannot be known except through personal relationship marked by trust, knowing and loving. This is John's discipleship.”

I think we sometimes get so focused on discipleship as right behavior, how we treat people, different types of activism that we forget the relationship with Jesus that is one of trust, knowing and loving, being grounded in attentive devotion to the shepherd and willingness to come in and go out under the shepherd's direction. Jesus says that his sheep hear the voice of the shepherd, the shepherd's call. Jesus is the true source of abundant life.

Psalms 23 gives us a further picture of abundant living. Kelly Murphy Assistant Professor at Central Michigan U says, Psalms Of trust have two things in common: a perceived calamity of some kind and trust that the calamity or disaster shall pass and all will be well. These songs seem to emerge in the midst of the chaos and confusion **not** after everything is OK again. That reminds me of the Life Cycle of churches and the phase of crisis and confusion. Perhaps we will know we've moved into surrender when these psalms of trust emerge and arise in our midst,

rather than anxiety, frustration, and fretting over protecting and maintaining.

Karen's statement about if it doesn't get done, it doesn't get done and the amens are an example.

The phrase "I lack nothing" reminds us of the children of Israel wandering through the wilderness for 40 years and although there was grumbling and complaining, in Deuteronomy 2:7 and Nehemiah 9:21 it says that they lacked nothing. Professor Murphy, "The benefits of the relationship are clear: have faith in the God who shepherds you through the wilderness, for history tells you that this God will not let you lack what you need. This God will lead you to the promised land, providing you green pastures (food), still waters (drink), and a straight path (protection)."

"Despite how perplexing it might be while we stumble our way through the darkness, hope and trust are appropriate responses; They keep us moving toward life." Kelly Murphy Assistant Professor at Central Michigan U.

Perhaps when Jesus talks about the abundant life he is remembering the second-half of Psalm 23 where we see God as this generous host who has prepared an abundant lavish banquet even as enemies look on. Even in that setting where there is some sense of threat the psalmist's cup overflows, their head is anointed with oil, which is a symbol of health and well-being, and a statement of faith that

surely goodness and mercy will follow them all the days of their life. So yes these enemies may be following, in the sense of pursuing him, but mercy and goodness also pursue him. Two weeks ago I mentioned the contrast between the vast power and reach of the Roman Empire versus the vast mercy of God. And here we are again with another image of the abundance of grace, goodness and mercy being enough for us, even in the darkness, even in the wilderness.

The song ends with these words, I shall dwell in the House of the Lord my whole life long. This sense of closeness with God, of dwelling with God in the temple, and enjoying the banquet of God and all of this goodness and mercy all of the care and protection, and the meeting of our everyday needs for comfort, purpose, protection and healing is available to us now. This is the abundant life.

All of this is happening in the darkest valley where we face danger and misfortune but it gives us hope that we are surrounded by far more than just darkness.

I see 4 different but related invitations from these two texts for us today:

Perhaps we need to redefine our notions about the abundant life and make sure it aligns with what the Bible actually says.

Perhaps we need to redefine discipleship and get reoriented toward the sheep-shepherd relationship.

Perhaps we need to sort out our needs from our desires and how God wants to meet them through Jesus.

And specific to FOH perhaps we have to redefine who we are at this point in our life cycle. Can we get very quiet so that we can listen for the voice of our shepherd? I truly have hope that we can get to a place of surrender if we remember and trust that we are surrendering into abundant grace and vast mercy and into the arms of the Good Shepherd where we lack nothing.

Come Lord Jesus.