

O Lord our God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, you who are our Rock *and* our Redeemer. Amen.

Following the Shepherd

May 15, 2011

Acts 2:42-47 Psalm 23 1 Peter 2:19-25 John 10:1-10

And in those days ... sheep generally hung out in one of two places. The first was the sheepfold. The second was the world, so to speak, or at least the world for a sheep. Grass and buttercups and crevices and streams.

Now, I don't know a whole lot about sheep raising in the ancient world, but I'm guessing that the sheepfold—the pen where they were all crowded in together—was used mostly for protection—from wild animals, from bad weather, wandering away during the night. But while the sheep were enclosed in the pen, they weren't really living, were they? They were safe, but there wouldn't have been plants to eat or space for the lambs to go frisking about. (I don't know, do grown sheep "frisk"?)

The shepherds were, of course, the ones who made sure the sheep were in the right places. And one of the shepherds actually served as the gate to the sheep fold. Once the sheep were all in, he'd just lie down in the doorway opening so they couldn't get out. So when Jesus says both "I am the shepherd" and "I am the gate," he wasn't just confused.

But a good shepherd didn't just keep the sheep in the pen all the time. What would be the use of that? Life stuck in the sheepfold would be awfully limited, awfully narrow. It was out in the pasture that the living—the eating and the frisking—had the potential of being abundant.

And that is the point of the passage we read from John: Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

Abundant life.

For a lot of folks in the world, it looks like Americans are all living an abundant life. Clean water, affordable food, available education ... life abundant!

For many Americans, viewing from afar those of us living here on Lake Erie, with beautiful scenery and lots of leisure activities—it looks like we’re all living an abundant life.

For a lot of folks in Port Clinton and Ottawa County, it looks like folks in this congregation are living an abundant life. The ability to live here while the weather’s nice and then go somewhere else during the cold, gray days of winter? Life abundant, indeed!

But I’m not sure those things are exactly what Jesus was talking about when he said that he wanted us to have life and have it abundantly. And I’m pretty sure that most of us, deep inside somewhere, are pretty sure that clean water, affordable food, a beautiful view, and a trip to Florida in the winter ... those don’t define abundant life. There’s something more. “The chance to not simply persist, but thrive; to not simply exist, but flourish. To have a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment; to know and be known, accept and be accepted.”¹

We work hard to achieve that kind of abundant living.

And actually, the culture around us tells us that we can achieve it, if only we ...

- If only we get the right education
- If only we choose the right career
- If only we read the right books
- If only we wear the right clothes
- If only we eat the right food
- If only we take the right trip

I found an interesting piece from a documentary on the show *Frontline* this week. It was talking about advertizing and how it changed sometime in the 1990s. It used to be that advertisements were designed to show that products were better than others. That they made our clothes whiter or our coffee stronger ... that they were fresher or prettier or tastier. And then at some point the newer-better-faster words began to lose their power. After all, we’d all figured out that buying the right sneakers didn’t *really* make you a faster runner. (I did love those ads for PF Flyers when I was a kid, though. They had me convinced.)

¹ David Lose, “Abundant Life” in Working Preacher, 05.08.11, http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id+475

When comparing products to other similar products no longer worked, the ads turned to something called “emotional branding.” That’s when we started getting ads for Nike that showed all those beautiful bodies glistening with sweat, or the car ads that showed far more scenery than automobile ... or my favorites, the ads for Saturn cars. Remember those? There were all those great people working at that welcoming plant in a community in Tennessee, and they were building cars for individuals. There was one ad in which we heard a woman’s voice reading a letter to the workers at Saturn. She told us she was a third-grade teacher, and she’d ordered a Saturn—the blue-green one with the gray interior—because they paid the same kind of attention to each car as she did to her students. And all the workers smiled and shook hands with the tourists who came by to see this cool place. Oh, I wanted a Saturn! I didn’t want some robotized factory turning out my car; I wanted it created by a community of friendly workers.

If we bought Nikes, the ads intimated, we’d be joining the community of strong, disciplined bodies. If we bought Saturns, we’d be rejecting faceless robotized manufacturing and embracing (and being embraced by) the community of automobile artisans. If we use a Mac rather than a PC, we’re aligned with a group of people who are creative and cool. If we drink milk, we’ll be one of those funny, friendly, wholesome people with the white stripe over their upper lips.

But do you hear what’s happening with these advertisements promoting “emotional brands”? They’re selling abundant life. They’re selling life that means something, that’s full of community, that’s worthwhile. They’re selling identity and belonging. They’re selling transcendence—being more than you ever imagined you could be.

“Emotional branding,” the *Frontline* documentary said, “seeks to fill the empty places that civic institutions like schools and churches used to fill.”²

But it’s not just in responding to advertisements that we try to fill those empty places and achieve abundant life. We join clubs, we give money to worthy organizations; we change our diets and plant gardens; we lose weight, we exercise; we take vitamin supplements and dye our hair; we invite friends to dinner and cuddle with our grandchildren. And all of those can be very good things to do, but they will not truly give us abundant life.

Only Jesus can give us abundant life. Jesus wants to give us abundant life.

² Ibid.

The question is, *Why don't we let him give it to us?*

I think the answer to that question is rooted in our need for control, our desire to be in charge. Because in order to let God give us—fully and truly—lives full of meaning, purpose and fulfillment—we have to let go. We have to be vulnerable. We have to expose our not-so-much-together sides. “So much of life in 21st century America is about protecting ourselves: giving the impression that we really do have it all together and in this way guarding ourselves against vulnerability.”³ But we cannot experience the life abundant when we are busy protecting our flanks.

I've been reading a book called *Lit*, by Mary Karr. It's her story of her journey out of alcoholism and into a life of faith. In it she talks about how drinking ...

... could ease an ache. So anything worth doing could be undertaken later. Paint the apartment, write a book, quit booze, sure: tomorrow.

Which ensures that life gets lived in miniature. In lieu of the large feelings—sorrow, fury, joy—I had their junior counterparts—anxiety, irritation, excitement.⁴

Drinking was Mary Karr's way of defending herself, of protecting her vulnerabilities. But a life filled with anxiety, irritation, and excitement is not a life lived large, with real, “large” emotions like sorrow and fury and joy. And it doesn't even come close to the abundant life that Jesus came to bring us.

Later in the book—years later in her life—Karr talks about checking herself into a psychiatric hospital and beginning to pray in ways she never had been able to before.

Vis-à-vis God speaking to me, I don't mean the voice of Charlton Heston playing Moses booming from on high [she writes] but reversals of attitude so contrary to my typical thoughts—so solidly true—as to seem divinely external. And quiet these thoughts are, strong and quiet. ... By checking in to the hospital, I've said in some deep way *uncle* ... I've stopped figuring so hard and begun to wait, sometimes with increasing hope to be shown.⁵

By checking in to the hospital, I've said in some deep way *uncle*. That's what Jesus is calling us to do: to say *uncle* to the belief that somehow we can achieve abundant life on our own, to stop figuring so hard

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mary Karr, *Lit*. (New York: Harper, 2009), 47-48.

⁵ Ibid, 276.

or thinking so hard or working so hard ... and to start waiting with increasing hope to be shown. To be shown God's love, to be given the life abundant.

Jesus came to lead us out of the sheepfold. It feels safe in there. Inside those walls we don't feel so vulnerable. But the life abundant can't happen inside the walls, even the walls of our own defenses. Let's cry *uncle* ... and let us follow the shepherd into abundant life.

Amen.