

"Abundant Life" (7May17)

Psalm23; 1Peter2:19-25; Acts2:42-47; John10:1-10

Jesus gives a great purpose statement today: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Yet it makes us ask, what does he mean? What qualifies (or quantifies) as abundant life? Is it about longevity, as if the number of years is what makes life abundant? Do you imagine it's having abundance in your life, of food on your table and square footage of your dwelling space and of possessions? Or is abundance in satisfaction, in enjoyment, in feeling accomplishment? Might the abundance of life come in relationships, in types of friends or delight in family? More, is it abundant through relationship with God?

We don't need to guess at understanding what Jesus might mean by living abundantly, since each of our Bible readings today hits on considerations of abundant life, to give a sense of what Jesus wants for you.

Let's start with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, since that is such a definitive statement of our faith and hope. We sang before, but join in if you know these words:

*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 paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, 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 forever.*

We may hardly need say or reflect on more for a vision of abundant life than those beloved

words. God abides as your Shepherd. Goodness chases after you so you lack or want for nothing. God guides you to calming waters and lush fields of peace and plenty. Even when life itself seems threatened in deadly dark valleys or by the presence of your enemies, you are comforted and safely kept in house of the Lord.

Still, as true and meaningful as those words are, we can't stop there, because I don't want you left thinking abundant life amid this faith of ours is just about you and Jesus, through your good times or troubles you endure or in some eternal heavenly home sense. As much as Jesus is your Good Shepherd and you are a sheep, you are a sheep of his fold and lamb of his own flock. You aren't alone, but are among a gathering of sheep. And, as Jesus will go on to say later in chapter 10 of John's Gospel, he has "other sheep that do not belong to this" group. It can't be individualistic. We need to look broader and recognize more to understand what Jesus intends for abundant life.

To begin considering God amid our relationships, let's take a fairly negative example. You may have been squirming in your seats during the reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, protesting and arguing in your minds about unjust suffering. I concur that there's much disagreeable there. Worse, this lectionary passage skipped the first verse of the section, which began with addressing "slaves, accept the authority of your masters," even if they're too harsh. Yikes! Probably worse still, the next verse after our reading says, "Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands." Double yikes! This among verses that commend enduring abuse and beatings!

We must quickly declare how wrong this is, but we first have to pause with an odd caveat. The author of this letter is trying to make sense of what the resurrection means, including in the course of life's difficulties, and in some way

understands that suffering is not the opposite of abundant life. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter says our worst difficulties in relationships don't necessarily cut us off from abundant life.

Using suffering in service of life by breaking oppression was the method of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. Dr. King cited exactly this Bible passage, realizing that "unearned suffering [can be] redemptive. Suffering...has tremendous educational and transforming possibilities." He liked to say, "The tension is, at bottom, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory, it will be a victory not merely for [African Americans], but a victory for justice and the forces of light. We are out to defeat injustice [he said] and not white persons who may be unjust."\* That's a message of striving through intentional suffering on behalf of abundant life, that one side can't win alone (as violence presumes). True victory for life needs to be shared by both sides. In Dr. King's example of nonviolent resistance, it may make sense to commend that pain should be endured.

But we have to admit 1<sup>st</sup> Peter isn't really talking about that. When this letter says that enduring unjust and unmerited suffering at work or in family relationships means you have God's approval, that's mostly wrong. God may be on the side of people suffering and hurting, but if the letter means that God approves of being abused, that is wrong and it is terrifyingly wrong. This passage has been used to perpetuate domestic violence. In another example, there have been some awful racist offences at St. Olaf College in recent days, and 1<sup>st</sup> Peter's model would be that those students in positions of weakness should just put up with insults, humiliation, denigrations, or threats. That

should not happen. That is not commendable. It's not godly. That is not abundant life.

Almost every source I read this week declared the need to understand this writing in its ancient context, that slaves and wives and children were property controlled by the authority of a man, that that society was shaped and limited by their economy—a word literally meaning the household order. But that doesn't make it okay. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter has some very faithful and wonderful things in it, but this is just plain wrong. It's wrong about Jesus, wrong about society, wrong for us.

As a counter-example, Paul's writings were in the same ancient context but refused to endorse that economic or household order. He undid slave\master hierarchy to invite them to live as brothers (*see Philemon*). He saw marriages as a mutual relationship (*see 1Cor7*). In Paul's understanding, "there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" and none should be treated as patriarchal fathers, because we are all counted as offspring and heirs to inherit God's promise (*Gal3:28-29*).

So 1<sup>st</sup> Peter can't just say that we need to put up with oppressive and abusive relationships or forms of society, because Paul rightly recognized that what Jesus was doing and is still doing for the sake of abundant life is to reshape our relationships and to confront unjust authorities, whether they be in economy, family, religion, school, government, or anywhere. The example of Jesus is not that he passively submitted to being killed but that he chose to risk his life confronting injustice, and even that not as a suicide mission but with God's further insistence on life over death. Like Jesus, it may be worth confronting powers for the sake of abundant life. And in that way, amid suffering, you may trust that God intends something other than your pain.

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\* "An Experiment in Love" in *Testament of Freedom*, p18

Let's move from a difficult passage to one that seems more obvious in its abundance. The reading from Acts is the same chapter as the Pentecost story, with the Holy Spirit creating faith in crowds of new followers of Jesus. This is portrayed as the very early infant church. Just as 1<sup>st</sup> Peter was trying to figure out, then, what it means to live as the church, to live after Easter, how to encounter continuity of life in this world even while believing it is forever changed by the resurrection, that's what the community is working on in Acts, too, trying to figure out what this way of life means. In this short reading, there are a couple ways they encounter the abundance of life: they study, they join in prayers, they eat meals together.

Oh, and they're also communists. This is a way of seeing the abundance of life, that we have enough to share, that it can't really be abundant if we imagine it needs to be hoarded, but is best when offered for all. Yet this idea of sharing everything in common, of selling possessions in order to distribute the proceeds as anyone had need has been rejected by plenty of folks, as it's almost as harmful as passive suffering in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter. Yet even as we're skeptical about difficulties of living communally, and even as that ancient community struggled with it—where some wanted to keep their own things and where within four chapters the food pantry wasn't running fairly—still we do practice this. We practice it in our offerings, bringing what we have to share life in so many ways for our community (like helping the homeless) and around the world (like funds for ELCA World Hunger and welcoming refugees). We should note this is what happens with our taxes. Those funds are for sharing a common good larger than what we could possess or accomplish on our own. That is a vision of abundant life.

Besides financially, in another aspect of being part of the flock and sharing in this community, I

had the privilege of hearing celebrations from Mary Rowe this week, of delight in the care and support and generosity of this congregation as she is recovering from her knee surgery. Now, being cooped up at home, stuck on pain medications, and wondering when she'll be back into normal routines may not sound exactly like abundant life, but as she shares the joys of this community, Mary recognizes it. This is the *koinonia*, the fellowship, the sharing, the communion that binds us together in this meal today, and that finds expression as our lives commune and become one with each other.

Finally for our discernment about finding abundant life are Jesus' words. He offers a strange image: I AM the gate. It's easier to picture Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who will rescue you from trouble and carry you on his shoulders. Or as the Shepherd of the sheep who leads us and guides us together as a flock. But here Jesus also says he's a gate. That's an odd idea.

First, it makes us wonder whether we're trying to get in or out. Is he a gate that protects us from marauders and harm? Or is he the way out from being trapped up so we can find freedom in green pastures of plenty? He says both: "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

Perhaps we need both sides of that. We see that church is not about being insiders who disparage outsiders. There's nothing exclusive about those in the church as better or more blessed. We're not here to hunker down and shut the world out. And yet we do come in through the gate for a message of salvation. We need a word unlike the bad news that surrounds us, we need the peace the world cannot give. We need the reassurance of resurrection, that life in Jesus wins, that those injustices and pains and fears of scarcity and all that threatens or breaks us apart do not and, in

the end, cannot define, confine, or conquer us and our world.

Instead, trusting the message of life that is stronger than death, trusting in Jesus who submitted to death in order to burst through it and undo its powerful grip on us, proclaiming that that is our reality, too, that nothing can stifle this goodness, we go out through the gate of Jesus to his world. We go out to share that good news. We go out to confront the nastiness. We go out to share our life abundantly. We go out to enjoy the blessing that nothing will steal that from us, nothing will be able ultimately to destroy God's goodness. Life in Jesus is for all for always. We go out, because through him, we recognize life more abundantly. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Made alive in Christ and filled with his Spirit, let us pray for the church, the world, and all of God's creation.

*A brief silence.*

Gracious Gate: You bring us in to assure us of resurrected life and send us out to live it. Bless our worship, that sharing our whole lives in communion, we also share abundantly with people in every place. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Shepherd of the flock of all creation, preserve pastures and local water sources, bless our community gardens and the native plants of our prairie, so that nature provides life and protection for all creatures. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Your abundant life spreads throughout our society. We pray for government and economy that look to abundant sharing. We pray for those who suffer unjustly, that they may endure, but also that oppressors would be transformed by your care. We pray for students at St. Olaf who are confronting racism and for all our systems and institutions that need to change. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Your shepherding care finds us especially when we're most in need. We pray for the poor, the homeless, the suffering, the afflicted, and the ill (*especially Mary Rowe, Fran Hall, Aletta Boakai, Robin Alexander*); and for those who will die this day. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

We share prayers for our community, for Bill Long, Andrew, Kristin, and David, Linda and Arden Mahlberg, Magda and Paul Reith, Claire and Sawyer, Helen and Andy Remington, Jeanne Duffy and Dennis Rhodes,

Joey, Natalie, Meghan, Ben and Christy Roberts, Stanley, Calvin, Hudson, and Caymus.

Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

We give thanks for the saints who, having followed your voice in this life, and now dwell with you forever, joining their voices in endless praise. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Receive our prayers, merciful God, and dwell in us richly, through Jesus Christ, our life and our redeemer. **Amen.**