



# First United Church of Oak Park

Life Abundant

John 10:1-11a

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October 7, 2018

A couple of years ago I came across an interesting book called *The Shepherd's Life*, by James Rebanks, a man who lives and farms in the Lake District of England. I've actually read it twice. I find it relaxing, and Rebanks' life is different enough from my own that his reflections give me some new perspectives. I have also learned a little bit about shepherds and sheep.

Rebanks has a surprisingly intimate relationship with his sheep. He does, indeed, know them by name, just like it says here in John. He knows their strengths and weaknesses. I noticed how well Rebanks understands his sheep in the section of the book about the lambing season, which is in late winter and early spring. Rebanks knows which ewes are really good and attentive moms. He also knows which ones are the less attentive moms, the ones who might accidentally trample their baby lambs, or who fail to bond with them. When these less attentive ewes are about to give birth, he tries to be right there, so he can give the mom a little help, maybe coach her a bit, and make sure the lamb is OK. If he needs to, he takes the ewes and new lambs out of the fields and into a barn, where he can give them the special attention they need until the lambs are big and strong enough to survive.

Rebanks also has a keen awareness of how vulnerable his sheep are. This also comes through when he talks about lambing, which is a precarious season, because lambs can so easily die in the first few hours of life. Winter is a precarious season, too. Sheep can get lost and freeze in the fields. They have a hard time finding food when it's buried under a couple feet of snow. Rebanks spends a lot of time on his snowmobile in the winter, delivering bales of hay to hungry sheep, rescuing strays, and keeping an eye on everybody.

Rebanks works really hard. The welfare of his sheep is rarely far from his mind. He attends closely to them. He shepherds them not just as a flock, but also as individuals.

"I am the good shepherd." When Jesus says this he's not talking about James Rebanks, of course; he's evoking instead the 23rd Psalm or other biblical texts that liken God's care to that of a shepherd. Reading about Rebanks' work puts flesh on this metaphor for me. "I am the good shepherd" is language that suggests intimacy, attentive care, individualized attention for creatures who are sometimes, and in some seasons, weak and vulnerable. "The Lord is my shepherd. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

In John, Jesus' claim to be the good shepherd comes right on the heels of his statement, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

In some versions of Christianity, this statement is interpreted as referencing the afterlife, the joys of heaven, whatever it is that we believe we are promised on the far side of death. It is a misreading of John to draw that conclusion. Abundant life isn't about our futures after death; it is about our present here and now, the fullness of life that God offers in Christ here, in our everyday lives.

This text sits at an interesting location in the gospel, in between two long and complicated stories in which Jesus gives people a new beginning at life.

The story that comes just before our text is a long one about the healing of a man who was born blind. We never know his name. He is known in the text as “the man born blind,” or “the man who was blind from birth.” Early in the narrative, Jesus restores the man’s sight and his friends and neighbors are amazed; they don’t even recognize him. “How did this happen?” they ask the man. When the man says that Jesus healed him, no one believes him. His neighbors do not believe him. The Pharisees refute the story. His parents fail to back him up. Jesus is the only one who supports the man, who in turn casts his lot with Jesus.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”

That’s the man’s story. It is after that story that John puts these words about abundant life into Jesus’ mouth. “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Then John tells the story of Lazarus, who is dead. You know this story. Lazarus has been in the tomb four days, and four days is a long time; the stench and decay are building. People tell Jesus he is too late. “If only you’d have come last week,” they say. But when Jesus orders the stone rolled away and commands Lazarus to come out, Lazarus does just that. He rises from death and lives again. Lazarus is alive in the here and now, not in some afterlife, but alive in present time.

This is where we find the abundant life that Jesus offers. It’s not far off in the future, it’s now – somewhere in the mix of the restoration of the man born blind, the new community that the man enters when he follows Jesus, and the renewed life of Lazarus. Jesus brings new perspectives to people. He invites us into new communities. He challenges us to roll away whatever stones might entomb us, so that we might walk free, breathe deep, and live as God calls us to live.

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

These two stories suggest something else. This promise is not just for an in-group. Abundant life is not a promise given only to the elite, or to a privileged few. Lazarus is, indeed, an old and dear friend of Jesus. But the man born blind is a complete stranger. He is just someone whom Jesus happens to encounter in his journeys. Jesus offers abundant life to anyone who seeks to engage him. There is no entrance exam, there are no dues to pay, there are no secret handshakes taught only to an accepted few. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” That is any of us. That is all of us.

And yet, the abundant life that Jesus offers is particular, too. For the blind man, abundant life is the gift of sight. For Lazarus it is new life and a release from death-dealing forces. For a hungry woman, abundant life might look like bread. For an orphaned child it might be a family. For a lonely man caught in cycles of despair, abundant life might be a glimmer of hope. As the good shepherd he is, James Rebanks treats each sheep according to its need. So does God.

“I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” The greatest risk in preaching a text like this is that, in her eagerness to put flesh on this idea, a preacher says too much. We dare not confine the idea of abundant life to my definitions, or to images of material wealth, or to Western intellectual constructs about what constitutes the good life. Let me just say that somewhere between the blindness of our youth and the walls of death that would entomb us as we die – somewhere in that space Jesus offers us abundant, beautiful, meaningful, well-lived life.

He tells us he is the gate through which we walk to find it.

I really wish John would stop mixing his metaphors. I’d ignore the “I am the gate” metaphor, except for the fact that this statement has also been used to set up exclusive standards, limiting access to abundant life only to those who are willing

to adhere to doctrinal conformity. I'm sure it makes Jesus happy when we get our theology "right," whatever that is, but I do not think that this metaphor is intended to set up a Christological prerequisite that we need to meet prior to being offered abundant life. That is to say, this metaphor is not intended to keep people out. When Jesus says "I am the gate," I think he invites people in.

On the front of our bulletins today is a photo of the St. Louis arch, an architectural masterpiece that always takes my breath away. I love traveling down to St. Louis and watching the bold simplicity of the arch rise over the horizon. The arch was built as part of the 150th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase and the start of the Lewis and Clark expedition. It stands as a symbol of western expansion and pioneer hopes.

There are many criticisms we could make about western expansionism, and those criticisms are legitimate. We should never forget the ways in which political and cultural systems privileged some people moving west and enslaved or decimated others. When left to human devices and desires alone, the quest for abundance can be distorted. This is part of what the arch signifies. But that's not the primary point I wish to make this morning.

On a more positive side, this glorious structure also signifies possibility and promise. For the thousands of people to whom the west offered hope - poor people, immigrants, young men and women setting out in life - the possibility that loomed before them as they crossed the Mississippi seemed almost limitless.

Gateway Arch National Park is a testimony to their hope; and it bears witness to another hope as well. On its grounds is the Old Courthouse, the site where Dred and Harriet Scott twice sued the government for their freedom from slavery. The Scotts lost those court cases, but they never lost their convictions about their human dignity, and their hopes for freedom have never been defeated. They yearned for life abundant, and they deserved it. And that hope lives on.

Looked at with that story in mind, the arch reminds us of the legitimacy of people's yearning for meaningful and productive lives. It reminds us that abundant life is found not when gates are swung closed in people's faces, but rather when gates are open and people are free to pursue the life to which God calls them.

"I am the gate." This gate by which Jesus stands is not closed. It is instead a gateway, and it is open to all who would enter. Jesus opens his arms wide and invites us to come alongside him. He invites us to experience what is possible in his company.

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

Thanks be to "God, who is able to do far more than we can hope or imagine, by his power at work within us" (Eph. 3:20).

Amen.