

Sermon by The Rev. Lex Breckinridge

Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020

John 10: 1-10

In these strange days, who doesn't feel a lack of things? Who doesn't feel that things are scarce? Even the most cheerful optimist can't be blamed for occasionally feeling like the walls are closing in. We are, after all, living in times like none of us has ever seen or experienced. So, if you're feeling a little untethered, a little aimless, a little lost in anxiety about the future or about your health or the health of someone or many of the ones you love; if you're lost in anxiety about your job or your retirement or your kids' future; if you're lost in anxiety about whether school is ever going to re-open because "I'm not equipped to be a substitute teacher for much longer," you've got lots of company. And, yes, we are all in this together, but we can be forgiven if we find ourselves saying, "Well, those poor souls on the Titanic had a lot of company too, and that ship sank." It wouldn't be an unusual thought. Lots of folks these days feel lost or feel like the ship is sinking.

So, I think it's a bit of synchronicity, a grace-filled coincidence, that Jesus shows up this morning to help us reframe those anxious thoughts about being lost and sinking and all alone – all alone even in the midst of a good-sized crowd that's also feeling lost. Listen to the last sentence of this morning's gospel reading. "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Now, we might also be forgiven in these days if our first reaction is that this is just a lot of happy talk. Life may feel anything but abundant right now. When visions of scarcity and lack and deep uncertainty trouble our dreams, abundance seems far away.

You can bet, however, that Jesus isn't talking about an abundance of things – which is where my mind reflexively goes when I hear the

word “abundant.” You know, I think about a cornucopia with all the fruits and vegetables and turkey pouring out of a horn of plenty. No, that’s not what he means. Just unpack the sentence.

“They” - meaning the ones who hear him and follow him - might have “life,” not stuff, but life and have it abundantly. “Abundantly” is an adverb modifying “life,” so it’s not an abundance of “stuff.” But what exactly is abundant life? Speaking for myself, my experience of abundant life has been about relationships - a loving and forgiving wife (and, yes, I’ve needed forgiveness *abundantly* lots and lots of times); children and grandchildren; friends, old and new; community, a community like this one here that has loved and supported me through plenty of hard times. “Abundant life” involves people. It involves relationships.

Jesus uses images his listeners would have understood readily. Images of shepherds and sheepfolds and gates. Images of protection and guidance and safety and security. Images of acceptance and love. They would have understood the gate – Jesus – to be the one who stands between the beloved sheep and the thieves and bandits who want to harm the sheep. His listeners would have gotten that right away.

Sheep without a shepherd – they would have understood that too. Wandering aimlessly, vulnerable, unprotected – at risk and lost in a hostile world. But there’s more to the image of the shepherd and the sheep and the gate and the safe harbor. The Good Shepherd *knows* his sheep and he’s confident that they won’t follow anyone other than him. The sheep know the shepherd’s voice. The sheep won’t listen to the thieves and the bandits. They won’t listen to the voices and the temptations that want to draw them away from the Good Shepherd.

And, why is that? Why so much confidence in a bunch of dumb sheep? It all goes back to relationship, the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. The Good Shepherd reminds the sheep that they know him, that they’ve trusted him unfailingly, that they can

continue to trust him. And he trusts them to know the difference between cheap hope and authentic hope. He trusts them to know the difference between real, authentic abundant life and the cheap and easy substitutes – the stuff, the toys, the power games we play, the toxic relationships that in the end rob us of abundant life. He promises to lead, and he trusts his sheep to follow.

Now, sheep being sheep, are prone to wander, “prone to leave the God I love,” as one of my favorite old hymns puts it. The shepherd gets that, and the shepherd goes a long way to find the lost sheep. In another image in which Jesus tells us about himself, he reminds his listeners that the shepherd searches day and night for the lost sheep even when the remaining 99 are home safe in the sheep pen. It’s all about the relationship, you see, and everyone counts.

There’s a through-line to our preaching here at St. Thomas in Eastertide. On Easter morning, we were reminded that when we’re weary and feeling small, there is a bridge – a bridge over troubled water. That bridge is Jesus, the Resurrected Christ. And then we were reminded that in the midst of our doubting and our fear and anxiety about the unknown, Jesus appears – appears in a locked and closed room with wounds in his hands and his side. Yes, he’s here, he’s present, vital and “alive.” And last week, the Hidden Jesus once again appeared to two grieving travelers when they least expected him, but when they most wanted him. Once again, he was present and alive.

Now, this morning, I know there are some of you who are so bone tired you’re not sure you can stand much more. I know there are those of you who are worried about whether there will be enough – enough for you, your family, the ones you love and care for. I know there are some of you for whom the stress of even going to the grocery store or the drugstore is getting to be too much to bear. To all of you – and to me – Jesus is saying “You are in it with me. I am in it with you. Together, together, we will make it.” It’s this life, this abundant life, that Jesus

offers us. And he has confidence in us to hear and to follow him. As the Psalm tells us: “Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me. Your rod and your staff shall comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

It turns out that there is a cornucopia after all, a real horn of plenty. We are invited to gather around, innocent as children at the Thanksgiving table, gather around this table, protected and loved by the Good Shepherd, the one who gives us our daily bread and who invites us to share the bread with each other.

Another one of my favorite hymns is “*The King of Love.*” It’s hymn no. 645, if you have your hymnal at home. And, it goes like this:

*The king of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never. I
nothing lack if I am his and he is mine forever.*

*Where streams of living water flow my ransomed soul he healeth, and
where the verdant pastures grow, with food celestial feedeth.*

*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed and yet in love he sought me, and on
his shoulder gently laid and home rejoicing brought me.*

We belong to the Good Shepherd. He calls each one of us by name. We lack nothing! Amen.