

Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 55:1-13

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

New Testament Lesson—John 10:1-18

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

One of the big “a-ha” moments for me in seminary (believe it or not) was during a conversation about church budgets. It’s true!

I admit: It’s not my favorite subject to talk about. But, I began to see them with new eyes after I first heard a church budget described as a theological document. A budget is a theological document.

It is so much more than a series of numbers and line items. In fact, we're doing serious damage to their purpose in the church when we reduce a budget to just dollars and cents—to just projections about money.

No, when it comes to the church and how we minister in Christ's name, a budget must be rooted in what we believe. It isn't something divorced from reality. It can't be developed in a vacuum—apart from the community's needs.

The truth is a budget is a black and white declaration about what we value—about what we think is most important in this world. Where we choose to put our resources—whether it's time, talents, or treasures—this says something about our identity—our *true* identity—not who we *think* we are.

In other words, friends... We can *say* we care about (X—insert whatever); but that's all lip service if we're not putting our money where our mouth is. For example: We can say that curbing global hunger matters to us. But does our budget reflect that? Do the ministries we're committed to back that up?

Well, if you couldn't tell, we've entered into stewardship season. Comes around every year—doesn't it? But, you know... I have to say—I take issue with the idea of a stewardship *season*. And by "season," we basically mean two months.

Are we to suppose, then, that we're called to really care about stewardship for just sixty days out of the year? I'm hard-pressed to believe that since the first job given to human beings after Creation is taking care of what God's given us.

No, being mindful of our resources—responsible stewardship *has* to be an all-year commitment. This is an everyday type of calling.

Siblings in Christ, if we can reframe our mindset about stewardship in this way, I truly believe the way to abundance will be made clear. More than that: I believe the abundance in our lives already will be made even clearer.

That's why, for the next few weeks, I want to dig into this idea of the abundant life Jesus talks about here in John's gospel. What does it mean for us to live this way? How do we live and breathe and serve with abundance?

By the way: This isn't a question we should approach lightly, either. No, this is something worth our time and consideration. I know this because Jesus tells us here in John 10 that it's why he came to us! It's why he's here—the reason he's among the disciples. It's why he's teaching and preaching—why he's performing signs of God's power.

Think about it for a moment. Think about how you might answer the question of why Christ was sent to the world—of why God became a human being. There are lots of Biblically sound answers to that: to redeem humanity, to save us from our sins, to show us what God is like, to find the lost and heal the sick, to demonstrate love's greatest form...

...all of which are correct, of course. But the picture isn't full without what Christ says to us this morning. Here, we have it directly from the Savior's mouth: *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*. Through Jesus, we have abundant life. We have a life worth living—a life full of blessing and beauty and cups overflowing.

Jesus draws on a metaphor God's people had known for centuries: The Lord as shepherd; the Lord's chosen as the sheep. As he often likes to do, Christ builds upon Jewish history and tradition—in this case, the familiar words of Psalm 23.

Here, Jesus isn't just *a* shepherd—or *my* shepherd—he's the *Good* Shepherd—the one willing to die for the sheep. While other shepherds might flee at the sight of thieves or wolves, the Good Shepherd puts himself in between the vulnerable and the forces of death.

He stands in the middle of us, the sheep, and anything that might've made life less worth living. Because, you see: Christ isn't just the Good Shepherd, he's a part of the very infrastructure keeping us safe from sin and evil.

I am the gate for the sheep, Jesus says. In other words: Christ is our rock and refuge at all times—both within the enclosure and outside of it. As we enter the gate, we are saved. We're forgiven forever—bestowed grace upon grace—grace that we, then, take with us outside.

And whenever we're led out, it is to prosper and find pasture—to go where we're needed. And yes: sometimes our presence as reflectors of God's light is desperately needed in the darkest valleys.

For the purposes of these next few weeks, perhaps we might think of it this way. The Lord is our Steward. The Lord is our Caretaker—dedicated to us even to the point of death—willing to lay down his life so that we live with abundance.

Friends: We can learn a lot from the Good Shepherd guiding us. Imagine, for a moment, if we cared for what God has given us with as much vigor and discipline and gratitude. Imagine the church being as deliberate and intentional with our resources—with everything entrusted to us—even our own lives.

Now imagine if we were half as generous—half as courageous with the lives we have—with the time given to us. Can you picture what the world could be like—how bright a light the Church could be?

Such a world isn't a fantasy. A Church that bright isn't some far-fetched dream. Both are possible when we recognize the reality of God's abundance—a reality that's been staring us in the face since the beginning of God's story—a promise kept with as many "Amens" as there are stars in the sky—with as many "Hallelujahs" as there are grains of sand.

And whenever your trust in the Lord's abundance begins to wear thin (we're all human after all), I want you to pause, and step back, and lean on those resources from which all other blessings flow...

Lean on the inexhaustible love of God. Trust in the limitless mercies of our Creator, the boundless faithfulness of the Holy One, the forgiveness that never runs dry.

For as long as the Good Shepherd leads us...as long as we remain in his care and part of his flock—that is to say, as long as we live—we graze on the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We are grazers of grace. And there is no pasture more lush than that.

Amen.