

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – May 7, 2017**  
**John 10:1-10 / Psalm 23**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

“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.”

This is Jesus’ mission statement according to the gospel writer John, to bring life – abundant life. If I had the chance I’d like to ask him, “So what makes for abundant life, John?” Is it how long we live? Is it prestige, power, or position? Is it knowledge, privilege, or possessions? Is it good health – freedom from illness, injury, and disability? Maybe abundant life is being free of conflict and human differences, living free of any challenge or adversity. Or maybe it’s having lots of exciting life experiences – traveling to new places, meeting new people, thinking new thoughts, taking on new work. Is it about having a robust social life with plenty of friends, laughter, and companionship, available 24/7 if we want it? Just what is abundant life? We all want it, don’t we? But what is it, and how do we know when we’ve found it?

My hunch is John would say, “It’s about having a relationship with God through Jesus, the complete incarnation of God’s love – all of God’s love wrapped up in this human package of a Son, given to us freely, no strings attached”.

In addition to his own gospel story, I think John might point us back to an ancient hymn which he knew well, and which Jesus knew well too, probably even by memory, or “by heart” as we sometimes say of things we have memorized. A hymn that paints a rich and evocative picture of what that relationship with God is meant to look like. The hymn begins: *“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want.”*

Most of us are familiar with the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, and some of us even know it “by heart”, can say it from memory. Just as John’s gospel gives us snapshot after snapshot of the “abundant life” Jesus brings, so the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm in clear and simple words describes the basic components of abundant life. They are: **God’s provision, protection, and presence.**

PROVISION. Basic needs provided for – food, water, a safe place to rest and be refreshed, guidance. These are probably not the things that come to mind when we think about “creature comforts”, but these are the basics, aren’t they? Not ten restaurants to choose from with every cuisine on earth you could imagine. Not miles of aisles in the grocery store, one totally dedicated to breakfast cereals. Not a king size bed complete with plush comforter, electric blanket, six down pillows and two controls for just perfect firmness on either side. And of course, let’s throw in a GPS for ease of navigation. *Basic* provisions – adequate food, clean water, a place to rest, guidance along good paths. Animals need these basics, and so do human beings.

PROTECTION. It's dangerous out there. No one needs to tell us this. Too often our real and imaginary fears are played on by others, those who would convince us to consume things we don't need. This has actually become a lucrative industry. There is the slick coaxing us to give away our power to those who may not have our best interests at heart. We know this, don't we? We walk treacherous roads with thieves and bandits lurking. Sometimes we get the voice of the shepherd and these other beguiling voices confused. There are animal predators waiting for just the right time to catch us by surprise and attack, frightening and scattering the poor sheep into bleating, baa'ing, bedlam. And then there is the ever ominous - valley of the shadow of death.

Notice the psalm writer does not promise there will be no predators, danger, or evil out there. "I shall fear no evil; for you are with me." Evil and death are real. But they will not be able to snatch us from God the shepherd's care and loving hand. The rod for keeping predators away; the staff for retrieving lost, wandering, separated, and injured sheep – these tools bring us comfort in the face of unpredictable and unavoidable threats and real danger. Even in the presence of those who trouble us, enemies, a banquet table, a feast is spread before us. Reflect on this image today as you come to receive the Eucharist. Even in the face of those things that trouble us – people, life circumstances, world events, all the many unknowns – God spreads a table before us. Jesus faced down death and evil and was raised to new life so we need fear nothing, for nothing will ever be able to separate us from God and God's love.

And our heads are anointed with oil. Streams of the balm of love, mercy, and forgiveness to heal all our wounds, whether the wounds are in body, mind, heart, or spirit. The oil of gladness and the oil of being anointed royalty as God's sons and daughters. This too, is divine protection – not necessarily keeping us from the storms in life that batter us, but calming us in the midst of those storms, even in the face of real and present danger. "I shall fear no evil; for you are with me."

And here then, is the final basic component of the abundant life – PRESENCE. "**You are with me.** Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Holy Presence. God's faithful, attentive, committed, loving, and guiding presence that goes before us and comes behind us - all our days. Is there anything more rich or full or abundant, anything better than knowing that we are always in God's presence? For as long as our hearts beat and we breathe, we are in God's presence. And in our final breath and last heart beat we will be in God's presence.

This then is abundant life – to experience provision, protection and the presence of God and all those who seek to follow and love God. We have been called into Christian community to remind each other of this, not simply for our own comfort and well-being. But to share this good news with this world that is in so many ways lost, confused, and terribly misled about what it means to live life abundantly. Our joy is that the abundance grows deeper and richer as we give the love we have been given away – freely, selflessly, generously.

Today, let us feast at Christ's banquet table. Let us taste and see that the Lord is good. Fed, refreshed, and strengthened, then let us go out to share the abundant life we have received. Our mission is to join our Lord in providing, protecting, and being present to the cries, wounds, and needs of the world. Because you know friends, with God, there is more than enough for all of creation to go in and out and find green pastures, quiet waters, restored souls, deep contentment and joy. Provision, protection, and Holy presence. May it be so. Amen.