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John 10:1-10  
The grass is always greener

*“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.*

The Word of the Lord.

Growing up, on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving my father would come home early from work meeting us when the bus arrived after school. The car would be loaded with activities and sandwiches, and we would hit the road heading west from St. Paul, Minnesota to Lincoln, Nebraska. Seven hours later we would arrive on “B” Street to the home of David and Genevieve Cook, my grandparents. Everything about that annual voyage was routine, from the meal we would receive when we arrived, to the food that was served the next day, to the activities we did on our remaining days in Nebraska. It was the same every single year and it was a welcome change of pace for all of us. One of my favorite parts of the Thanksgiving experience was the ever-predictable arrival of the J.C. Penny’s Christmas catalogue. About 400 pages of glossy delights that we would pour over, circling items, dog earring pages, creating our lists of things we hoped might be ours just one month later. Remote control cars, talking teddy bears, fancy train sets, heated blankets – J.C. Penny’s had it all!

There was nothing quite like the joy and wonder of that catalogue and its beautiful display of what the abundant life could hold. The catalogue sparked our childhood imaginations.

Abundant life is an important biblical phrase. The phrase sparks the spiritual imagination both about what our lives could be like and should be like and it sparks our imagination about what our God is like. After Jesus describes what life is like living with the Good Shepherd, what it means to listen to God’s voice, he offers something of a thesis statement for his life, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” We hear this lesson about the gate and the pasture, and we hear about the thieves and bandits trying to kill and steal and it seems quite urgent and dramatic. Jesus recognizes that the disciples are not understanding him. So, he simplifies the message. “I am the gate,” he says, “Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

There are a variety of voices that can lure us away from God's path. We are warned to avoid false prophets and false teachers throughout the bible. Jesus is urging them to learn his voice, then to listen for his voice and follow it. My way is the path towards life – this is the path leading you to abundant life. All the other voices will lead you to a jealous life, a shallow life, a prideful life, a hopeless life, a stressful life, a hedonistic life, a depressing life – they rob you of your joy, they will steal your faith, they will diminish your life – thieves and bandits I tell you, do not follow them.

Some hear this passage from John's gospel and read it to be a story about exclusion versus inclusion. Who is in the pasture and who is out? But I hear a description in this text about what life could be like if we could really opt into God's way versus our way or any other way. God's way, or pasture, as the metaphor goes is a place where we are known and welcomed, a place where we can safely come and go, a place where we are counted and watched over, a place where our basic needs are met, a place of abundance, satisfaction, contentment, and joy. Behind the gate is a place of green pastures – a lush place to live and grow and find our joy.

Psalms 100 says: *"We are God's people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise."* What Jesus is describing is a place of really abundance.

With this description of what God is offering, the outpouring of interest should be like the demand for Taylor Swift tickets. 14 million people tried to buy tickets! They said the demand for the tour could have filled 900 stadiums. And this is just a night at a concert – but what about passing into the gates of God's love and God's grace and God's presence? Ticketmaster wouldn't stand a chance if we really really understood what Jesus was describing. On this side of the gate is life – abundant life. On the other side of the gate is constant restlessness and an endless pursuit to try and find happiness with only momentary successes.

Fundamentally, we all yearn for the abundant life Jesus offers. We want to feel whole, nourished, included, supported, important, and loved. We want it for ourselves, and we want it for others. We want our parents to experience abundant life after years of raising kids and working hard. We want our friends to experience abundant life and not just a life of striving to prove themselves and earn enough and just survive each week. We want our children to experience abundant life and to know that whatever happens, they have value and purpose and love, and their needs will be met. There are many, many stories of people living lives today which are lacking. Lacking just the physical resources they need to survive. Or lacking the emotional support to move forward. Or lacking the internal worth to feel okay with themselves. Or lacking the opportunities to make life better for themselves. Or lacking hope that anything really matters. Or lacking faith to believe that God or anyone else could love them.

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." It must pain God to see how much we lack. It must anger God to see things robbing us of life. It must frustrate God to no end, to call for us and have us turn away and listen to other voices. Abundant life is the way of God, yet so often we pick other paths.

C.S. Lewis said, “The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to the other voices, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.”

Jesus was talking about these same wild animals – the inner anxieties and fears that call to you, the external pressures and temptations that distract you, the thieves and bandits wishing to steal the precious days of your life from you, all these things are just keeping you from experiencing abundant life. Jesus says to enter his way, listen to his voice, follow his path and to do so – you need to shove it all back - you need to stop the noise, you need to put down your devices, you need to stop putting your worth in things that will rust and tarnish and fade. Start focusing on your needs and the needs of others and stop wasting precious time obsessing with the glossy catalogues of life.

Jesus is the gate. Not the gate to keep some of us out and others of us in but rather the gate that wishes to protect his sheep. Protect us from the paths we might go down if left to our own devices. Jesus calls us to his very self. God is love – when we contemplate the nature of God as goodness and beauty then we can see why we might enter God’s gates with joy and thanksgiving. God’s presence is not a place of limitation or exclusion but a place of security and peace.

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” If that is the thesis statement for Jesus, what if ours was: “He came that I might have life, I followed him and found abundance.” May it be so – enter God’s gates with thanksgiving.

Amen.