

## “Life in all its Abundance”

### **First Reading: Acts 2:42-47**

*Today’s reading is a description of life in the community following Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on the people. The new community is sustained in worship and fellowship, shares what they have, and ensures that everyone has enough.*

<sup>42</sup>[The baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup>Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

### **Psalm 23 - The Divine Shepherd**

<sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters; <sup>3</sup>he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths for God’s name’s sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

### **Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:19-25**

*Doing the right things does not guarantee that one will not experience difficulties, hardships, rejection, or even suffering. Here Christ is presented as the model for our path of endurance and loyalty to God, particularly amid adversity.*

<sup>19</sup>It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup>If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is

that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. <sup>21</sup>For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

<sup>22</sup>"He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

<sup>23</sup>When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup>For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

### **Gospel: John 10:1-10**

*Jesus uses an image familiar to the people of his day to make a point about spiritual leadership. Those who listen to Jesus are led to abundant life.*

[Jesus said:] <sup>1</sup>"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. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Sheep – in this day and age, often caricatures and comic figures, as I talked about in the welcome to today. In Jesus' time, they would have been a well-known topic of conversation – part of economic engine – everyone knew sheep, and new their value for wool and meat, and the importance of protecting them against predators, and going after the ones who had gone astray. They would also very quickly have understood his comparison to people - easily confused, needing strong guidance....

Central to the various conversations about sheep was of course the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Even in our modern times, this psalm speaks to us.

## Psalm 23 - The Divine Shepherd

<sup>1</sup> *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

<sup>2</sup> *He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;*

We too need rest for our souls – the end of a stressful office day can be as tiring as a day in fields and barns

<sup>3</sup>*he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

We seek purpose and direction in life – there are many false prophets and purveyors of untruth, it is hard to find the best voice to follow.

<sup>4</sup> *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.*

Evil, danger, illness, worry – all are part of anyone's life, whether they walk in faith or not – like Covid 19, they do not discriminate, they do not pass over – walking with Christ through in this valley, and learning to walk with others in their valleys, assures us we are not alone, that they are not alone.

<sup>5</sup> *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

Regardless of how others might see us or think of us, we are loved in God's sight, and God affirms us, blesses us, and sets a rich table for us.

<sup>6</sup> *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

Goodness and mercy are not ours to strive to achieve – they come to us by virtue of our relationship with the shepherd, the grace of God. Not only do they come to us, they follow us, they pursue us, they invite us into God's presence now and in eternity.

There is an agelessness about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and a poetic beauty and majesty that transcends cultures, generations, and even faiths.

The Shepherd is not to be ignored or dismissed lightly – it takes a firm hand to lead sheep, it takes courage and strength to deter or fight off predators. And at the end of it all, Jesus promises this to his followers:

*<sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”*

What does it mean to have life abundantly? At first glance, we might see it as a matter of material wealth – a large and beautiful home, many beautiful possessions, a life rich with travel, arts, culture, entertainment. When we are young, and indeed, if one comes from a life of poverty, these would seem to be much yearned for, but in time, we come to understand that abundance in relationship and meaning is so much more than abundance in things.

Abundant life might look something like one of the earliest Christian communities as described in our text from Acts today:

*<sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.*

Abundant life can come in the form of such a meal, such a gathering, or a creative Zoom version of it. Abundant life can come in a good telephone conversation, or a belly laugh watching or reading something funny. It can come in a good cry after watching a drama, or a deep sigh after we've read a really good book. In short – abundant life comes in being human, being real, being alive, being in relationship.

The hardest part of our Covid 19 pandemic is of course the physical distancing, especially with senior friends and relatives, and those who are ill,

as they do not have time on their side to wait it out, for it is in our relationships that we find meaning.

Our lives with the Divine Shepherd do not end with an idyllic existence in a rich pasture without a care in the world. Indeed, Jesus calls each of us to take care of each other, to take care of his sheep – as he so urgently tasked Peter after the dramatic breakfast on the beach after his resurrection:

*<sup>15</sup> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ <sup>16</sup>A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ <sup>17</sup>He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. (Jn 21:15-17)*

Jesus, the Divine Shepherd calls us by name – You are mine...come and follow me...I will be with you...your are blessed and loved...with me you will be safe...I give my life for you. And then, Jesus reminds us that there are many sheep in his fold, and many who are not, and invites us into relationship, into mission, to find them, nurture them, and feed them with goodness and mercy, always.

<sup>1</sup> Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

<sup>2</sup> Worship the Lord with gladness; come into [God’s] presence with singing.

<sup>3</sup> Know that the Lord is God. It is [God who has] made us, and we are [God’s]; we are [God’s] people, and the sheep of [God’s] pasture.

<sup>4</sup> Enter [God’s] gates with thanksgiving, and [God’s] courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless [God’s] name.

<sup>5</sup> For the Lord is good; [God’s] steadfast love endures for ever, and [God’s] faithfulness to all generations. (Ps. 100)

Let us hearken to that divine voice, and let us follow. Amen. Alleluia!