

Starting on Easter Sunday, we have been talking about what Easter means for us – today. Lot's of folks like to talk about what Easter means. Most of the conversations about Easter center around very technical and theological meanings of Easter – in the world of professional theologians they call this *soteriology* – that is the “study of salvation.” Now, that is a very academic exercise – very mental and, for all the good stuff that comes from a very disciplined, academic study of the how, why and what of salvation – it really does not get a lot of traction with those of us who are struggling day in and day out with what it means for me to follow Jesus and what Easter means for me today, right now in the circumstances that I find myself in.

So we have been talking about the meaning of Easter, where the rubber of our lives hit the road. On Easter Sunday we talked about the meaning of Easter depends a lot on how we react to the empty tomb or how we allow Easter to affect us. Easter will have absolutely no affect on our lives if we do not want it to. God never intrudes into our life where we don't want God to be.

Last week we talked about the idea that for whatever Easter is – Easter is all about you and all about me. Easter is Jesus coming to us right in the middle of the reality of our lives and being with us. Jesus is not just some fuzzy idea in the midst

of thousands of other fuzzy ideas. Jesus is real and Jesus can have a tangible impact on who we are and what we are all about.

Today, we are invited to listen to one of Jesus' "figures of speech" as he teaches about one of the realities of what Easter. **Easter means that the door has been opened for us to enjoy and participate in what Jesus calls the "abundant life."**

In the story for John's telling of the life and ministry of Jesus, Jesus talks about life lived in the community of the faithful as being akin to sheep under the care of a shepherd. Jesus talks about being inside the sheep pen, how one gets in and out who really cares about the sheep and who is only around to attack them and to destroy them.

Using the image of sheep to describe those who Jesus really cares for is a powerful image. From a distance, sheep are nice. They look nice and fuzzy – but up close, sheep are – well, sheep. They can be dirty, nasty, and well, not too smart. Left to themselves, sheep are a disaster! Now I know this doesn't apply to any of us here – but we should all be aware of what is really being said. There is a good reason that sheep need a shepherd. Alone they would not make it for too long. This is the reason that in one of Jesus' parables – the one where he talks about the good shepherd going off to find the one sheep that is lost – so powerful. The one lost sheep would die if the shepherd does not find it. Because sheep cannot take care of

themselves. Now here is where the analogy gets personal – especially for us Americans who pride ourselves on being self sufficient. Jesus is not advocating mass welfare or a government takeover of the lives of people who are just too dumb to care for themselves. Jesus is talking about something much more important.

Sheep cannot care for themselves because they don't know the difference between want and need. Sheep are fickle. Sheep are temperamental. Sheep are willful. Sheep believe that they know what is best for them even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. That is because they are sheep! Without a shepherd, sheep would not be able to find good food or water because they would be too busy following every whim that rests on the tip of their nose. Sheep have their own ideas about what the abundance of life is all about – and, unfortunately, that leads to death – for the sheep we are talking about real death.

The image here applies pretty well to us. There are a lot of attributes of the sheep that translate closely to us – especially when we translate the image to our relationship with God. When it comes to God – man are we a fickle bunch of folk! People tend to follow whatever whim or fancy or trend that seems to be out there is the vain hope that one day, they will find meaning in their lives.

Some people seek meaning in their life by buying that dream house they have always wanted. The one with a big kitchen, three bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a

beautiful view overlooking the whatever. There is the hope that once that dream house is achieved, they can sit back and tell themselves “This is the life.” For some others, an abundant life means season tickets to the Giants. Being at the games, experiencing the fun – cheering on their favorite player “Woohoo!!! This is the life!!”

Others seek meaning and purpose in life through an endless search for **having the right stuff** – drinking the right beer, wearing the right shoes, driving the right car, working for the right company, making the right income. Wants supplant needs – I want it, I should be able to have it, I deserve it becomes the mantra of those who live out life absent the loving careful attention of the shepherd and if the story from John tells us anything it tells us that kind of life leads to death –spiritual, emotional, psychological, relational and physical.

So what is the alternative? Well, according to the story – **the alternative to living our lives chasing after meaning and purpose is to live our lives abundantly.** That is what Jesus promises us – abundant life. There is an answer to the eternal question, "How do I find happiness and satisfaction in life?" Jesus says in John 10:10 the purpose of why he came. He said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly". What did Jesus mean when he said that we can have "abundant life"? You deserve an answer

to this question. Abundant life is not about possessing stuff or about possessing the right types of stuff. Abundant life is not about desiring what is currently at the tip of our noses. Abundant life is not about doing all the stuff that sheep tend to do when they are left to figure out what life is all about on their own. According to what Jesus tells us, abundant life is all about listening to the voice of the shepherd and following where the shepherd leads.

New Testament scholar Leon Morris writes “Not only does Jesus give the best of things in the life to come; He gives the best of things in this life now! Yes, there are difficulties. Yes, there are problems. Yes, there are challenges. But the constant fellowship that we enjoy with God (and the community of faith) far outweighs the temporary trials of this life.”

It seems clear to me that Jesus makes the point that there are a few places in this world where we can experience the abundant life. The one place that exists that offers the highest potential for abundant living in right here within the community of gathered believers – in the church. We live in a world of shifting values, fickle desires and fads. Trying to live life by the standards of the world lead to a host of problems in our lives. Living in the community of faith gives us an anchor, a firm foundation from which we can meet the challenges of life head on and not be overcome by them.

The one comment that I hear over and over again when I talk with people who are not involved in the life of the church is that they are too busy. People tell me that they have too many other commitments and there is just not enough time to really get involved in the life of the church. My heart breaks when I hear that because I know deep with my soul how wrong that is. People are not over committed, people are just committed to the wrong things.

Our life, our time, our relationships are precious gifts that God has given us and we need to take care of them – we need to do what every is necessary to take care of what God has given us. Tiger Woods did an interview for ESPN prior to this year's Masters tournament. When asked what was most eye opening about being the father of his daughter – Tiger quoted his wife who told him, right after they had arrived home from the Hospital, “You know, if we don't take care of her – she dies!” WOW – those of you who are parents know exactly what that means!

Our children – Michael and Marissa are gifts from God that have been given into our care and it is Michelle's and my responsibility to take care of them. Take care of their physical needs and to teach them how to be adults. If we don't do that, they will die. Physically, spiritually, emotionally – you name it.

The same is true for our lives. If we don't take care of them – they will die. The thief will come and destroy us – that is just a fact of who we are and what life

is all about. We could say the same for the church – if we don't take care of it, make sure that it is healthy and vibrant and growing – it will die. God gave it to us to be the place, maybe the only place that we have access to abundant life. But if we don't take care of what God has given us – it will die.

Abundant life is not about getting what we want, when we want it. It is not about having the right stuff, belonging to the right sports team or club or having our days filled to the brim with every conceivable activity. Abundant life is the life that we have been promised, by Jesus, that we will experience when we listen to the voice of our shepherd, follow his lead and allow him to guide and direct our thoughts, our decisions, our behaviors, our commitments and (yep you heard it here first) our time management.

Thanks be to God that God loves us so much that God wants only the best for us – a life filled to the brim. A life of abundance. A life in communion with him and in constant fellowship with the gathered community of faith.