## John 10:10-18

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.”

When Paul Simon wrote the song, *Mrs. Robinson,* it wasn't exactly written for the movie *The Graduate.* In fact, the name first included in the song, *Mrs. Roosevelt*, was changed when Paul Simon was asked to write some songs for the movie. When he wrote the song, Simon sought to capture a nostalgia for an earlier time that was the antithesis of what he called the “iconoclastic, mind-expanding, authority-defying 60's.” That's how Joe DiMaggio made an appearance in the song. DiMaggio was a baseball legend who played center field for the Yankees between 1936 and 1951. He made the All Star team every year that he played and his hitting streak of 56 games is still the major league record. As many of you will remember, Simon's lines went like this:

*“Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?*

*Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you.*

*What's that you say, Mrs. Robinson?*

*Joltin' Joe has left and gone away.”*

As it turns out Joe DiMaggio was always puzzled about how his name made it into the song. When Paul Simon met DiMaggio in a restaurant many years after the song was written, DiMaggio said to Simon, “What I don't understand is why you ask where I've gone. I just made a Mr. Coffee commercial. I haven't gone anywhere!” Simon explained, “I said that I didn't mean the lines literally, that I thought of him as an American hero and that American heroes were in short supply. He accepted the explanation and thanked me. We shook hands and said good night.” For Simon, Joe DiMaggio was a symbol of an earlier time, when hard work and dedication were qualities to be admired and when the Yankee legend was held up as an ideal for many people. That DiMaggio didn't quite get that makes the story a bit ironic and certainly quite charming.

Jesus knew **exactly** what he was doing when he spoke of himself as a symbol of his listeners' yearning. The gospel writer John records a number of Jesus' “I am” sayings, in which Jesus uses metaphors to explain his significance to the world. Jesus says: “I am the Bread of Life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the true vine. I am the way, the truth and the life. I am the gate of the sheep.” And today: “I am the Good Shepherd.” All of these symbols were familiar to Jesus' first-century listeners. At the time, a typical shepherd would have cared for twenty to eighty sheep. The shepherd walked with the sheep, spending all day and night with them. He named his sheep, and his sheep knew his voice. He was entrusted to care for the sheep, protect the sheep, lead the sheep, water and feed the sheep. The people to whom Jesus speaks understand the sacrifice and dedication it takes to be a shepherd, though they likely do not completely grasp what Jesus is saying when he names himself the Good Shepherd. For Jesus is taking everything the people know about shepherds and referring to the shepherding action of God for God's people. The full implication of Jesus' words will come later when Jesus actually lays down his life for his friends. Then they will begin to see how Jesus the Good Shepherd leads his sheep through life's darkest valleys and out to the other side, cares for them in the presence of their enemies, overcomes all that threatens them and is willing to die for them.

This is no Hallmark card shepherd but a fiercely protective guardian who will do anything for those entrusted to him. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus lives at the edges of polite society, out in the wild, untamed places of the world. His life remains perpetually in danger. He faces again and again the mockery of the hirelings, who consider his self-sacrificial vocation absurd. Because he's in it for the long haul with his flock, he not only frolics with lambs, but wrestles with wolves. He not only tends the wounds of his beloved rams and ewes; he buries them when their time comes. Why? Because he loves them with a love the world has never known and has come to give them not just life, but abundant life.

What does that mean for us, the sheep of Jesus' 21st century flock? What is abundant life in our day? Our culture defines abundance in terms of quantity. More. More stuff. More money. More friends on social media. More security. More years of life. Jesus defines abundance differently. He defines it as deeper relationship - with him, with God, with one another. For Jesus, abundant life is more forgiveness, more letting go of the past and living fully in the present, less worrying about the future. Abundant life is caring that others have what they need to be safe from their enemies. Abundant life is trying to be a little more like shepherds ourselves and less like sheep. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us— and we ought to lay down our lives for one another," the Epistle of 1 John reminds us.

In Jesus, abundant life is coming to the table Christ prepares for us, taking the body he has allowed to be broken and the blood he has shed and finding that they fill our deepest hunger and thirst: for belonging, for love, for forgiveness, for shelter from life's dangers, for strength for life's challenges. Abundant life is letting ourselves be led to still waters when our souls cry out to be restored. It is being led in right paths when we we cannot seem to choose anything but wrong paths ourselves. Abundant life is not wanting what the world tells us to want but putting ourselves in the hands of the one who needs us to follow him, so that we may begin to dream of what it means to lay down our lives so others may have life.

“I am the Bread of Life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the true vine. I am the way, the truth and the life. I am the gate of the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd.” This shepherd walks with us, spends all day and night with us. He names us and we know his voice. He is entrusted to care for us, his sheep; he protects us and leads us, he waters and feeds us. In him we find our way and the deepest meaning for our lives. He gives us life in this world and in the world to come. It may take a lifetime for we stubborn, willful sheep to get that. But when we loosen our grip on all that we think is important and place our hand in the hand of the Good Shepherd, we find ourselves led into the richness of abundant life. It is there that our wounds are bound, healing ointment poured on our heads, briars and brambles pulled out of our fleece and skin. We hear God's voice guiding us and trusting that it will lead us to good places. We find ourselves protected from hired hands who do not really care for us. And then, cared for and loved, we look beyond our comfort, to those who are not yet in the fold. We hear Jesus' words, “I have other sheep,” and ask him for the courage to reach out tender shepherding hands to them.

Amen.

*Easter 4B*

*April 22, 2018*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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