

John 10:1-10
Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
April 26, 2026

When Life Gets Real

One of the visions of the Church, that is, one of its aspirations, is the Abundant Life. From time-to-time, there have been witnesses claiming to have caught glimpses of it, experienced times when for a time at least, it characterized their lives, both in their individual lives and in the context of the life of the Church.

There are some, not a few, who claim it as a summation of their entire lives. Other times it appears as a distant dream. Either way, it is part of the church's preaching.

Today we have read three texts, one as a call-to-worship, and the others as regular readings. The gospel reading uses an agricultural illustration, that of sheep being led, following a shepherd, who protects them and cares for them and knows them.

The reading concludes with this line, “. . . I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” In some translations, abundantly. The implication is that a fulfilling and meaningful life is a gift from God, tied to faithful and obedient living.

We start by acknowledging that some take this to mean that God intends for everyone to be wealthy in worldly terms. Some call it, “The Gospel of Wealth.” This interpretation may be dismissed because it is not

consistent with the larger biblical message that involves, among other things;

a preference for the poor, “Blessed are the poor . . . for theirs is the Kingdom of God,” and an exhortation that there is more to life than material possessions, that deeper meaning is found in relationships characterized by love and trust, thus, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind,” and, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” are presented as the greatest commandments.

And we are also told that one cannot have two masters. “You can't serve God and money,” a strong hint about the direction we ought to be looking.

These biblical reminders are found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, which also tells us not to worry about our lives; to consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and to, “seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be added . . .”

Given that believers are found all over the economic and social spectrum, there must be other ways to measure life in terms of abundance . . . fulness . . . satisfaction.

The other two readings help. The first one is from the Acts of the Apostles, and it depicts the life of the earliest believers, at least for a brief period right at the very beginning.

We are told that they worshipped at the Temple, that they held everything in common. They were devoted to the apostle's teaching, the Koinonia (the Fellowship), to the breaking of bread, and to prayer; and that the Lord added to their number daily.

It wasn't long before the harmony was disrupted and they began to scatter, and the faith grew beyond the limited confines of its origin. The text is written in almost a nostalgic way as if longing for a lost past, which by the time the Acts was written, it was.

I am sure down through the centuries and right up to the present time, believers have had experiences when all was well like that, when there was genuine fellowship, probably not perfect, but more than good. Something like it happened in the various denominational settings of more recent times. That era seems behind us now. We are meant to aim for it in a new form, it is a goal.

Yet the church is called to be in the world and the world is muddy and conflicted. There is no way for a group of believers or for the Church as a whole, to avoid the distortions and contradictions, and the muddiness of the world.

The church should be willing to accept the criticism that comes along with its mistakes, and seek to be better, all the while realizing that we are under the command of a Savior who is committed to our care. Part of what a more better life means is connected to this relationship.

The other reading is, of course, the 23rd psalm. It is one of several premier texts in all the bible. I always make sure to incorporate it into the service when it comes up in the readings, for it tells us the truth about our lives and even as a pre-Easter text, foreshadows the Easter message.

Like the reading in John, it speaks of a shepherd who can be trusted and knows how to find us when we get lost. The shepherd is the Lord and it is not inappropriate to think of Jesus, who names himself as The Good Shepherd.

It opens with a universally appreciated pastoral scene as the divinely given life setting, which means that we are born into a beautiful world. It speaks of the restoration of the soul when the world's life wears us down.

Very honestly, we are told that it is also true that life is lived in the, "Valley of the Shadow of Death," which means that in addition to beauty and wonder, there is also hardship and danger. At this point the psalm changes its perspective. The rest of the psalm is more personal;

"I will fear no evil, for *thou* art with me.
Thy rod and *thy* staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

Thou anointest my head with oil, *my cup overflows.*"

When life gets real, that is, when the hardships intensify, is also when God's grace intensifies, our conversation about God switches from the third to the first person, as it does in the middle of the 23rd Psalm.

The nearness of the Lord is pictured here, both in discipline and in not just sustenance, but abundance, of care and attention to the shallowest and the deepest necessities of life and all that is in-between.

Here is the confession of a believer who has been tried, has some life-experience, and acknowledges God as the source of all that is good, and as an abiding presence. Though this life has dangers and hardships, God accompanies us through our days, in times both good and bad.

And the final affirmation of the psalm is that we are surrounded by God's love and mercy all the way, and will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The psalm addresses every feature and stage of our lives with a realistic portrayal that includes the reality of God. It is one thing to be brutally honest about life's hard experiences and the truths associated with them, and about the human incapacity to do anything about it, but to do so without also proclaiming God's grace and care is less than honest, because it lacks the telling of the whole truth about the way things are.

Easter is the season of encouragement, the time of the year to remember, honor, and celebrate that part

of the truth that involves the good news, the miraculous news of God's goodness, mercy, and love.

Is it possible to say that the fairest reading of scripture leads to the conclusion that abundant life is to be under the care and discipline of the Lord? And that the appropriate response is obedient faith, gratitude, humility, and before all is said and done joy, even in the Valley of the Shadow? After all it was in a cemetery that the resurrection happened.

One wonders if there is anything more important for us to do than to take stock of the givenness of our lives, especially when life gets real, in times when the dangerous side of life intensifies, and offer ourselves as living sacrifices, especially then, given in gratitude for the gift, and to honor the God who shepherds us throughout life and into eternity.

[Back](#)[Home](#)