

**To Life!**

**Psalm 23, John 10:1-10**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**May 7, 2017**

### **Introduction to the Reading**

Though the lectionary assigns only the first ten verses of John chapter 10 for this morning, it is very important to know that these verses are actually a part of a much larger passage which includes all of chapter 9. Chapter 9 – which I hope you will go home and read – tells the long and involved story of Jesus healing a man who was blind since birth. Briefly, Jesus heals this man... and since this was not an everyday event, the man's neighbors were skeptical and questioned whether it was really him. Then, he's taken to the Pharisees who interrogate him about just how he received his sight. When he tells them it was Jesus, these religious leaders who are supposed to be the shepherds of Israel... who are supposed to care for, protect, and nourish the people... refuse to believe that his healing is a sign from God and expel the previously blind man from their community. Finally, after his expulsion from the synagogue Jesus seeks him out again and brings him into the community of his followers. So that for the blind man, salvation was not only receiving his physical sight but also his spiritual sight: recognizing who Jesus is, believing in him... trusting him... and becoming part of his community.

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

“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.

### **Sermon**

You raise a glass to toast a retirement and say, “To good health!” You raise a glass to toast a newly married couple and say, “To happiness!” You raise a glass to toast a 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and say, “To forgiveness!” But if you're toasting in Hebrew, what do you say? You say “*L'chaim*,” which is not merely a toast to health... or to happiness... or to friendship... but a toast *to life itself*. “*L'chaim. To life!*”

Toward the end of this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus says something that is close to *l'chaim*. He's speaking to his disciples. He wants them to grasp his core mission. So first he uses that well-known Biblical image of nurture, care and protection – the shepherd of the sheep. But when they don't seem to get it, he drills even deeper and uses another metaphor – he is like a shepherd, but he is also like the *gate or door* of a sheepfold. Now, I don't know about you... but I grew up in suburban Atlanta. The closest I ever got to sheep was the state fair each August. So what we need to picture right now is a cave-like indentation into the side of a Middle Eastern hill... with a shepherd... or a group of shepherds... laying themselves down on the ground... sleeping at the opening of the cave. It is literally a human gate that keeps the wolves and bandits out and all those impulsive, wandering sheep in. Some scholars say this was the practice of shepherds in those days. But whether the gate is made of wood or human bodies, the force of the image is the same. Jesus guards his sheep from wolves and thieves getting in... and he guards them from their tendency to wander out.

And then finally, Jesus tries to express as clearly as he can the intent of his mission and ministry: "I am the gate," he says. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture... I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Meaning that in contrast to all that would rob them of life – all the "thieves and bandits" he mentions – Jesus gives life in abundance... not just survival, flourishing... not just getting by, thriving... not just existence, joy. It is the very definition of the salvation that Jesus brings... life abundant. So... "*L'chaim*." "*To life*."

Yet, what does that mean... really? When I try to imagine what salvation really is... what it looks like... or say, when I try to actually describe abundant life for someone who may not know anything about Christ... first of all, I realize it is very hard to do. Try it over lunch today or coffee tomorrow – try to describe to someone the salvation that Jesus brings that leads to abundant life. It's hard... but it's so very important to do... and when you do it I think you'll quickly realize just how much we have narrowed and severely limited the "salvation" Jesus brings. This is one of three things I want to share with you this morning.

We hear Jesus say: "All who enter by me will be saved" and we think: "Oh, he's talking about forgiving us of our sins... about erasing all the ways we have been unfaithful in the past... about wiping the slate clean... THAT'S what salvation means." Or we hear him say he came that we might have abundant life and we think, "Oh, he means eternal life... life after death... going to heaven. That's what he means." But as wonderful as forgiveness and heaven are, do you see how that relegates salvation either to the past or to the future? What about now? What about new life and possibility now? Forgiveness of sin is great, of course... I dare say we all need it! And the promise of eternal life with Christ in the communion of saints is great, too... I dare say we all look forward to it! But if that's ALL salvation is – then it seems to me we're missing the whole point that the resurrection and life we celebrate this Easter season is not the resuscitation of a corpse who will exist just like before... but the promise of new life and possibility and potential and power. Friends, when Jesus saves us he saves us not only

*from* something – sin and death – but also *for* something – for life in all its abundance here and now.

Well, this brings us to the second thing I want to share. For while Jesus doesn't really define "abundant life" in any detail, remember that he speaks of it right after the healing of the man born blind. The way John tells it, there's no break in the action between the amazing sign of healing and Jesus' teaching about it. So when Jesus says he came to bring "abundant life" he's talking about the man born blind... and what is abundant life for him? Well it is physical eyesight, of course... it's no more of the darkness he had known his entire life. Imagine him discovering the colors and contours of the world around him... imagine for the first time seeing facial expressions and bodily movements. It's eyesight, yes... but it is also a newfound freedom from his lifelong dependence on others. Never again will he wonder where his next meal will come from or who will answer his cries as he sits begging outside the city. Because from now on he will know the safety and security of family and community. He will experience both beauty and liberation... light and new opportunity... abundant life. And he will know from whom he received it.

Well, when we remember that this man born blind was Exhibit A in Jesus' teaching, then perhaps we can begin to ask what it means for us. You see, salvation looks different in different places and to different people... it's the same Lord who offers it, but abundant life is always Jesus' response to whatever it is that is robbing his children of their life, purpose, and joy. For the blind man it is physical and spiritual sight... but what is salvation for a single parent of two working three jobs to make ends meet? An older friend whose kids are grown and whose grandkids live hundreds of miles away offering childcare one night a week so she can go to the grocery alone or take a walk or even date? Could it be a few food stamps each month... or the assurance of affordable health care... or just a good hot meal in a welcoming place called "Sabbath Soup" each Sunday at noon? What is salvation for a teen who is being bullied at school and on social media? The acceptance by a group of friends who regardless of their differences will surround him and stand with him against the abuse?

What does salvation look like for the financially comfortable retiree? More golf? More trips? More shopping? More lunches out? Or might it look like a junior high kid sitting across the lunch table at school... or mentoring a young entrepreneur who needs mentoring in best business practices... or befriending a couple of folks in a nursing home who have no one else?

What is abundant life for any of us who have seriously said or done something to a loved one that we really wish we could take back? Understanding? Forgiveness? An opportunity to confess and maybe get a second chance?

Right now to Cindy Therriault, who several months ago suffered a catastrophic fall and who just last week – after months of healing - progressed to the rehab phase of her recovery. I can tell you that right now to Cindy, salvation looks like some of you... because some of you are picking her up from rehab three days a week so that Don can work... and so that she can achieve her goal and walk down the aisle at her daughter's July wedding. I hope you get the picture... I think

you do. The salvation Jesus bring always appears in response to whatever is robbing his children of their life and purpose, meaning and joy.

Finally this - if what I have said this morning is even remotely true... if the salvation Jesus brings to the world is more than forgiveness of the past and eternal life in the future... and if the abundant life he offers looks different in different places and to different people... then friends, I think that today you and I are on the receiving end of a profound invitation from the Lord himself – an invitation to not only *listen to* Jesus' promise of salvation and abundant life... and certainly not to put off its fulfillment until after we die... but actually *to live into* it right now...to expand what we think of as the “good life,” and discover what Jesus has to say about that.

How do we do that? Well, not to sing the same tune as I did last week, but I do think the “how” has a lot to do with what we talked about last Sunday. If you were here, I hope you remember “Worship Plus 2” – If you were not here, please read the sermon online or watch it on our Facebook page. Worship Plus 2 is a simple, yet profound way to think about the basic rhythm of the Christian life... about how we might live a balanced Christian life. Rooted in regular worship of God, we also find at least one way to “inhale” the love of God and one way to “exhale” the love of God. We inhale through Bible study or a small group or some sort of devotional discipline... and we exhale God's love to others through some sort of intentional Christian service.

Though I'm not really a slogan kind of guy, Worship Plus 2 is like a formula that helps us keep the main thing the main thing in our lives. And when we truly try to do it... when we truly make worship and inhaling and exhaling the priority in our lives... I promise we will quickly see what is robbing us of meaning and purpose and joy. And we will see what is robbing those around us (whom we love) of their meaning and purpose and joy. And in the midst of all the busyness and distractions and temptations we have, just the rhythm and balance of “Worship Plus 2” will help us keep the main thing the main thing. And according to Jesus, that's really what it's all about – keeping the main thing the main thing is salvation... it is living the abundant life he came to give us.

Let us pray...

O God, our Good Shepherd, in you we have all we need... you set a feast for us... our cups run over... help us not to want even more. You guide and direct our ways, help us to follow your path of righteousness. You are with us always, even in the darkest places, give us faith to trust you. You love us so much that you would lay your body down... help us SO to love you and love our neighbors that we might experience and share the abundance of life you created is for.

In the name of the Father...