

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Easter 4 (A) ~ 30 April 2023
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10

*God of Abundance,
You prepare a table before us in the presence of all our fears;
You bless us with oil,
our cup overflows.
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

When I was a School Chaplain, one of our most cherished traditions was to observe Holocaust Remembrance Day (or *Yom HaShoah*, in Hebrew) every spring. Because we in the DC area are blessed by our proximity to the US Holocaust Memorial and Museum, most years we were honored to welcome a Holocaust survivor as our special guest preacher for that Chapel. I always tried to impress upon my students that this was a gift, because in the not-too-distant future the world will no longer be able to hear the first-person witness of those who lived through one of, if not *the*, greatest atrocities that humans have inflicted on one another. It never took much convincing: as soon as the young people met our guests and began to listen to their stories, they were enthralled. My students got it, pretty quickly. Let's just say that it's rare for a room full of 450 or so teenagers to fall silent, but usually you could hear the proverbial pin drop during our Holocaust Remembrance services.

One of the last guests who came to speak during my time at St. Andrew's was Louise Lawrence-Israëls, and like so many who lived through the Holocaust, she tells her story to help document what happened and to honor those whose lives were lost. She also bears witness to the resilience of the human spirit.

Louise was born in the Netherlands in 1942, two years after the Nazi invasion. In January 1943, Louise and her family were ordered to move to Amsterdam, and shortly thereafter they went into hiding in a top-floor apartment. They could barely move, for fear of making noise and revealing themselves. The family lived there until May 5, 1945, when Canadian forces liberated Amsterdam.

Louise was three years old when she went outside for the first time; that moment is among her earliest memories. To hear her describe what it was like to feel the sun, or to stand

barefoot in the grass, is heart-breaking. Even though she was quite young, she remembers vividly resisting the outdoors at first. It was completely foreign to her. She talks about recoiling her feet when her mother tried to put her on the ground, because she didn't like the feel of grass between her toes. Louise had difficulty adjusting to life *outside* the confines of her family's small apartment; she had never known anything else.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

This verse – Jesus's "mission statement," of sorts – has long been my favorite in all of Scripture. Jesus's vision for us, His fondest hope for His followers, is that we experience life to its fullest, in all its abundance.

But what does "the Abundant Life" look like?

To begin, I think that most of us will agree that when Jesus talks about abundance He does *not* mean an accumulation of "stuff," or wealth, or fame, or power. While some of our sisters and brothers in Christ subscribe to the so-called "prosperity Gospel," which promises that believers will be rewarded with temporal riches, it's safe to say that most mainline Christian denominations do not understand God's abundance in that way. In fact, it may be argued that "stuff," or wealth, or fame, or power actually can get in the *way* of abundance. I am reminded of a prayer that asks God to "disturb us"

*when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life¹*

Sometimes our comfort and privilege can be a stumbling block to a full and meaningful and joyful life. Sometimes less really is more.

When Jesus talks about the Abundant Life, it's pretty clear that He is not measuring the quality of life according to worldly standards. As we well know, following Jesus doesn't necessarily lead to comfort and privilege.

Instead, the Abundant Life that Jesus offers has everything to do with *quality*, rather than quantity, or plenty. The Greek word for life here, *zoe*, means so much more than viability or vitality, than drawing breath and having a pulse. To have *zoe* is to possess the "absolute

¹ Attributed to Sir Francis Drake

fulness of life...which belongs to God” – life “real and genuine, a life active and vigorous, devoted to God.”²

The Abundant Life is life connected to our Source (with a capital “S”), grounded in God’s very Self. It is about knowing who we are and *Whose* we are: created in the image of God and endowed with inherent dignity, worth, and purpose.

Jesus’s vision, His fondest hope for us, is all about experiencing life “outside the walls,” so to speak. It’s about running barefoot through the grass and feeling the sun on our faces, metaphorically. Those walls may have been erected by others, in circumstances that are beyond our control. But often we construct them ourselves...

I’ll explain.

For whatever reason, we humans have an unfortunate tendency to make our lives smaller. I don’t think we do it on purpose, in most cases, and it may not even be conscious, yet we do it just the same. We do it by clinging to the illusion that more “stuff,” or wealth, or fame, or power can bring us real joy. We make our lives smaller by holding on tightly to our need for control. We make our lives smaller by pushing ourselves to perform, achieve, and acquire – even when we know, intellectually, that these goals so often lead to stress, anxiety, and depression. We make our lives smaller by insisting on behaviors that hurt ourselves, that hurt others, and that hurt the heart of God. We do it just the same. In many ways we choose to stay locked up behind walls of our own construction. We opt for *spiritual poverty* over *abundance*.

Jesus paints a picture of a very different kind of life – a life beyond our wildest dreams. It is a life of connection, and relationship. In this morning’s Gospel Jesus compares Himself to a Good Shepherd. He tells us that the Good Shepherd “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out,” and “the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” Or, in the words of the late Episcopal priest and spiritual writer Margaret Guenther, “we can listen for the shepherd’s voice and rejoice because he *knows* each of us in this blundering sheepish flock.”³ The Abundant Life is about knowing and being known by Jesus – which, in turn, expands the horizons of our expectations and dreams. Jesus’s vision for our lives is always so much bigger than our own.

You may remember the controversy that arose in 2003, when the Diocese of New Hampshire elected Gene Robinson, who is openly gay (and who was partnered at the time) as their Bishop. So intense was the hostility in some quarters that Bishop Robinson literally

² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/zoe.html>

³ The Reverend Margaret Guenther, “Known by the Shepherd,” *The Christian Century*, April 26, 1995.

had to wear a bulletproof vest to his own Consecration. Bishop Robinson reflects on that day in this way:

*I remember feeling blessedly calm about whatever might happen. Not because I am brave, but because God is good and because God has overcome death, so that I never have to be afraid again. That is the power of the resurrection. NOT in what happens AFTER death, but what the knowledge of our resurrection does for our lives and ministries BEFORE death.*⁴

I would say that *this* is abundance: What the knowledge of our resurrection does for our lives and ministries *before* death.

As Christians, we are an Easter people, and we proclaim a God Who can – and has – overcome the greatest atrocities that humans inflict on one another. We set our hope on a God Who brings new life out of death – and Who promises that same new life to each of us. And that relativizes everything. It relativizes our human suffering, *and* it relativizes our illusion of control. It does not eliminate suffering or the illusion of control, but it does relativize them.

The knowledge of the Resurrection gives us the freedom and courage to step outside of the walls built up around us, whatever they look like. It is an invitation to let go of the ways in which we tend to make our lives smaller – consciously and intentionally, or not. It is an invitation to a life of joy, and generosity, and meaning.

Perhaps, then, we can hear Jesus’s mission, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” in light of the Resurrection. Jesus calls us to step outside the confines of worry and fear, outside of self-interest and self-protection, into something bigger. He calls us to real abundance – God’s abundance.

How might you be making your life smaller than Jesus intends? Of what might Jesus be calling you to let go right now?

I’m going to end this morning with a prayer written shortly after 9/11 by Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of that important book that I’ll bet many of us have read, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. As you may know, Rabbi Kushner died on Friday, and I invite us to ponder these words in tribute to his long life and profound legacy. They speak powerfully to the call to the Abundant Life.

Let us pray:

⁴ Quoted by the Rev. Susan Russell, “An Inch At A Time: Reflections on the Journey,” March 21, 2008 (<http://inchatatime.blogspot.com/2008/03/good-friday.html>)

*Let the rain come and wash away
the ancient grudges, the bitter hatreds
held and nurtured over generations.*

*Let the rain wash away the memory
of the hurt, the neglect.*

*Then let the sun come out and
fill the sky with rainbows.*

*Let the warmth of the sun heal us
wherever we are broken.
Let it burn away the fog so that
we can see each other clearly.
So that we can see beyond labels,
beyond accents, gender or skin color.*

*Let the warmth and brightness
of the sun melt our selfishness.
So that we can share the joys and
feel the sorrows of our neighbors.*

*And let the light of the sun
be so strong that we will see all
people as our neighbors.*

*Let the earth, nourished by rain,
bring forth flowers
to surround us with beauty.
And let the mountains teach our hearts
to reach upward to heaven.⁵*

My friends, come, step outside. Step on the grass, and feel the sun (if only figuratively on this rainy day). Come enjoy the Abundant Life – a life connected to and grounded in God.

Amen.

⁵ <https://www.standrewsepiscopal.org/prayer-requests.html>