

# “PASTURES OF PLENTY”

A Sermon by The Rev. Janet L. Abel  
Preached on the Fourth Sunday after Easter, May 7, 2017

*Lectionary Reading: John 10:1-10.*

## **M**y Land I'll Defend with My Life if It Be / 'Cause My Pastures of Plenty Must Always Be Free

Good morning. My sermon title of “Pastures of Plenty” came to me because it’s a

song originally by Woody Guthrie. It’s very powerful, sung by an Irish group named Solas, which is Gaelic for “peace.” You can find this on YouTube, of course, and I’ll read you the lyrics:

“It’s a pretty hard row that my poor hands have hoed  
My poor feet have traveled a hot dusty road  
Out of your dust bowl and westward we rolled  
And your deserts were hot and your mountain was cold

I worked in your orchards of peaches and prunes  
Slept on the ground in the light of your moon  
On the edge of the city you’ll see us and then  
We come with the dust and we go with the wind

California and Arizona, I make all your crops  
And it’s north up to Oregon to gather your hops  
Dig the beets from your ground, cut the grapes from your vine  
To set on your table your light sparkling wine

Green pastures of plenty from dry desert ground  
From the Grand Coulee Dam where the waters run down  
Every state in this Union we migrants have been  
We’ll work in this fight and we’ll fight till we win

Well, it’s always we rambled, that river and I  
All along your green valley, I will work till I die  
My land I’ll defend with my life if it be  
‘Cause my pastures of plenty must always be free.”

It’s a powerful song, as I said, and the lyrics have a lot to do with this sermon. It’s really important to think about where our food

comes from — the truck farms that grow our vegetables and the people who pick that food. A lot of them are migrant farm work-

ers to this day, and this is the beginning of our season for farm markets, which we're all looking forward to for fresh produce. Today in particular is important because the UCC has designated today as "Rural Life Sunday," which is why we have the lectionary passages about shepherds for today.

## **C**elebrate "Rural Life Sunday" with a Camp-out in the Rain

Also connected to this is the seasonal camp-out to raise money for the homeless. This Friday, if you would like that experience, you can join Clare Price and Doug Garner as Julie Ann Johnson and I did last year. We had a marvelous night in the rain. We were protected mostly by a tent, but the rain kind of came in anyway. It is just one night of discomfort to get a little taste of what it's like to be homeless or outside, as migrant farmers often must be — all those people who live and work outside.

It's "Rural Life Sunday." I realized as I started to work on this sermon that many of us are disconnected from rural life. The lectionary readings are passages we love. It really doesn't matter what kind of dementia my nursing-home residents have. I started on Psalm 23, and most of them were able to join in with me.

I've known this psalm so long that I don't remember learning it. Once in a while I mess it up, but I know it very well — "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." You know it too, and connected are these famous shepherd verses from John 10;1-10. Who here has ever kept sheep? May I see a hand? Julie Ann has kept sheep. And some others of you have also done that.

## **S**heep Are Dumb; They Can Go into a Corner but Can't Get out

Sheep are dumb, right? I understand they're pretty dumb. They're what? They're willful. They do things to get in trouble, which is why we have this image of a shepherd with a crook. That stick with a hook on it is to yank a sheep out of its willfulness, the trouble they get into and can't seem to get themselves out of it. I've been told that sheep can go into a corner, forget that they're stuck, and the shepherd has to help them retreat from the corner because they can't figure it out and they can die there.

Who here has ever lived on a farm and done farming? There's a whole bunch of you. In this neck of the woods, there are a lot of farmers and people who have grown up on farms. New Jersey, not so much. There are farms in New Jersey. It is called the Garden State for good reason, but our family wasn't one of them. We were definitely city people so I don't know a lot about farming, but I love Psalm 23 and its beautiful imagery. And the hymns that we're singing, based on Psalm 23, are also beautiful. Their words are comforting and promising, and Jesus again is making promises in his goodbye speech here in John 10.

But as always in John, Jesus comes off as, well, seminarians call him "cosmic Jesus." Here the first three gospels are called Synoptic, Greek for "seen together." Matthew, Mark, and Luke kind of tell the story.

In fact, I've heard them described like the front page of the paper — who, what, where, why, when, and how. And John is kind of like the editorial page — embroidered with a lot of imagery, a lot of metaphors. And in the gospel of John, Jesus is never really straightforward. In fact, Jesus is constantly confusing the people he's speaking to. Like

Nicodemus, the guy who visits him at night, and the woman at the well.

## **T**he Disciples Are not Much Better; They Can't Understand Jesus

Here John tells us straightforwardly that even the disciples don't get what Jesus is saying. He's "waxing poetic," and poetry can be tough. He is talking about sheep and shepherds and gates and pens and thieves and robbers and so forth, and then he switches metaphors. This passage occurs during "the long goodbye." He gives really long speeches in John. In fact, John is different from the other gospels. There are long discourses broken up by what's called signs in John, miracles. The three Synoptic gospels aren't like that.

This passage in the gospel of John is not easy to understand — full of metaphors, as I said, which change. At first, Jesus said, "I am the shepherd, and the sheep know me." The other people who don't come in by the gate, who climb over the fence, are thieves and robbers. I am the shepherd, and the sheep know me because they know their shepherd's voice, and that tends to be true. In Israel to this day, villages have big sheep pens, and all of the sheep of the town are kept in one pen. And each morning, the shepherds' job is to round up those sheep and lead them out to good pasture — Pastures of Plenty, where they can eat and graze all day.

The shepherds either have whistles or use their own voices, and their particular sounds are recognized by their own sheep. They whistle or shout out to their sheep, and only their own sheep will follow them out of the gate and to their pasture. As Jesus said, sheep know their shepherd's voice. There's also a gatekeeper in the story. His job is to

open the gate for the shepherd. The sheep hear the voice, and then the shepherd leads the sheep through the open gate. Notice that the shepherd doesn't lead the sheep into the pen, he leads them out into pastures, Pastures of Plenty.

## **A**bundant Life Is Found in the Pasture, not in the Sheep Pen

Then we are told that the disciples don't know what Jesus is talking about, but he then switches his metaphor and says, "I am the gate; all the others are thieves and bandits." And next we have the last sentence of this beautiful passage (John 10:10): "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." That last word is a direct connection with Psalm 23, that very last paragraph. It seems to speak of the life to come — "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies . . ." That's not so comforting, but then ". . . thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." I used the King James version because that's kind of automatic. A lot of us learn the psalm that way and they still speak it that way. My cup overfloweth means abundant life. Abundant life is found in the pasture, not in the sheep pen.

It's beautiful imagery, but I have some problems with it, as I often do with John. Jesus calls himself the gate or the door — the only gate, the only door. All the others are thieves and bandits. That's a problem. My lectionary group, a bunch of ministers and I, study these passages, and we all agreed on a problem: Is Jesus the only gate to abundant life? Can we say that for every single person? No, we really can't say that, can we? There are many gates and many paths that lead to what we all have to define as the abundant life. There are many gates, many

paths for many different people. And who is the gatekeeper here? This is another character and the gate.

What is it that keeps us from abundant life? What is abundant life, anyway? I need to define it for myself, and you can define it for yourselves as well. Think about it. What is abundant life? And what would be its opposite? I think its opposite might be fear, but abundant life might be a metaphor for love, for living life fully, abundantly, and authentically. For being fully, completely ourselves.

And what keeps us from that? Recently, I was sharing a movie with my residents in the nursing home, teaching them about big topics like heaven and hell and so forth. What happens next? One of the movies that deals with that topic of fear directly is called *Defending Your Life*. It goes back away, made in 1978, and starring Alfred Brooks, so of course it's a comedy. It's a good movie, and it does have a few serious layers.

## **B**rooks Dies in a Car Accident; Needs a Defense Lawyer to Conquer Fear

Alfred Brooks' character dies suddenly in a car accident, and he wakes up in a hotel room. He takes a tramcar to his defense attorney's office, where he's going to spend the next three days of his existence. Movies often do this; characters are in a sort of way station, a waiting place, a place of being judged. That's one of the many ideas that people have about the next life. Is your life in the balance? Do you go on? Do you go up? Do you go down? You're not sure, right?

In this case, Brooks is on a tramcar, as in Disneyland, and he goes and meets his defense attorney, who tells him that he's going

to defend him these next three days because everything that you do or don't do is all based on either love or fear. Brooks has been ruled by fear all his life, and his defense attorney is going to do what he can to defend him against the charge that he is ruled by fear, so he won't necessarily go down in *Defending Your Life*; you go back to your earlier life to have a do-over, hopefully to get over your fears and have an abundant life and to go on and catch that last tramcar to heaven.

He meets Meryl Streep, who has had a wonderful, abundant life. They go to a hall called The Pavilion of Past Lives, where they witness scenes from past lives that they've lived. Streep's character is fully embraced. She is full of love and goodness and has no fear. She sees herself in several fire scenes, one of which is a firefighter saving a family from a burning building. In another scene, she's a knight in shining armor. "Follow me, men!" A wonderful person.

And here is poor Alfred Brooks. Fear influences his life. He's a native who is running away from an animal who is about to eat him. So fear has been his theme. Afterwards they meet up, with Streep boasting, "I was a knight in shining armor. What were you? And Brooks says, "Dinner." It's very funny, and the person who guides them into The Pavilion of Past Life is none other than Shirley MacLaine. I really like her in this movie.

## **W**e Are the Sheep, Stuck in Corners; We Need a Shepherd with a Crook

*Defending Your Life* is all about fear and love, the two basic emotions of life. What keeps us from abundant life? It's fear, basically. So we're the gatekeeper in this story, really. And we know there are many gates

that lead to The Pastures of Plenty, to abundant life. Of course, we are the sheep who get stuck in corners, who need shepherds with their crooks to haul us out of corners. The thieves and the bandits or the gates and the paths that don't lead to abundant life — I think they exist in life, as well.

There's a Rumi\* quote: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing, there is a field, and I'll meet you there." Out beyond fear there is a field, and I'll meet you there.

We have in our imagery the sheep pen versus The Pastures of Plenty, embracing life and all that it has to offer. And who but the shepherds? Any kind of guide, I think, really. Not just Jesus, but certainly Jesus, and anyone who leads us to abundant life. That can be a teacher, a mentor. That can be a friend, a partner, a Sunday-school teacher, a book, an idea. There are lots of shepherds in life, I think. And that means lots of gates and lots of paths. More than one gate, certainly, and more than one path. The

thieves and the bandits — those who lead us to the un-abundant life, who lead us to death. There are many, unfortunately, of those horror-filled lives of drug and alcohol abuse. These are paths that don't lead to life, but to self-destruction. The gatekeepers are ourselves, basically. Abundant life. The life I pray that we're all heading toward, that we're experiencing in the here and now because it's what Jesus, God, wants us to have, life abundant. My cup runneth over. Your cup runneth over.

Let's give God great thanks for abundant life. And on this Rural Life Sunday, practically speaking, our farms. We give God thanks for farm workers. Migrant farm workers are out there, already picking crops and toiling. Also transportation and weather workers — all who are involved in getting food on our tables.

*Amen.*

\*A Thirteenth-Century Persian Sunni Poet and Mystic.