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*Straight from the "Hart"*

January 14, 2024



## Enemies of Abundant Living (1): The Shepherd of Abundance

Welcome to Hartland UMC's "Straight from the "Hart"". We are glad you are here and participating in worship through this service script.

### Affirmation

Join on the bold font on this Affirmation based on selections from Titus 2.

(P: Pastor, C: Congregation)

P: The grace of God has dawned upon us with healing. We rejoice to declare our faith in him: Do you believe in God the Father?

C: **We believe in God the Father. He has revealed his love and kindness to us. In his mercy he saved us, not for any good deed of our own, but because he is merciful.**

P: Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

C: **We believe in Jesus Christ. He gave himself up for us to free us from our sin. He set us apart for himself -- a people who are eager to do good.**

P: Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

C: **We believe in the Holy Spirit. Generously poured out upon us through Christ our Savior, so that -- justified by grace, we might become heirs with the hope of eternal life. Amen.**

ad. from "Affirmation of Faith based on Titus 2:11-15, 3:1-8" by Michael Perry, jubilate.co.uk

And until that day comes, the Psalmist tells us to give thanks to *ADONAI* for his grace, for his wonders bestowed on humanity! For he has satisfied the hungry, filled the starving with good. Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and proclaim his great deeds with songs of joy.

Psalm 107:8,9,22 (CJB)

### Opening Prayer

God of love, you abide with us; you provide for all our needs and guide us in your ways. Out of gratitude for your care, we bring ourselves before you. Use them for your work of caring, that all may feast at the table of abundance, walk without fear, and drink deeply from the cup of compassion. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

ad. from "Offering Prayer inspired by Psalm 23, 1 John 3" by Mary Petrina Boyd, ministrymatters.com

## Call to Worship

In the darkest valley, or at the banquet table.  
In the hard work of life, or during moments of ease.  
In our day-to-day reality, and in times set aside –  
like this time, now –  
for worship, for listening, with every step we take,  
goodness and mercy follow us, and our lives overflow.

ad. from "Call to Worship inspired by Psalm 23"  
by Joanna Harader, spaciousfaith.com



## Music

Let's worship, then, by recognizing whose we are and drawing even nearer to him through this time of worship. Let's sing

### **I Am Thine, O Lord**

Words: Fanny J. Crosby, 1875 Music: William H. Doane, 1875

1. I am thine, O Lord, I have heard thy voice, and it told thy love to me;  
but I long to rise in the arms of faith and be closer drawn to thee.

#### Refrain

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord, to the cross where thou hast died.  
Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer, blessed Lord, to thy precious, bleeding side.

2. Consecrate me now to thy service, Lord, by the power of grace divine;  
let my soul look up with a steadfast hope, and my will be lost in thine.  
(Refrain)

3. O the pure delight of a single hour that before thy throne I spend,  
when I kneel in prayer, and with thee, my God, I commune as friend with friend!  
(Refrain)

## Intro to and Responsive Bible Reading 1



Today we look at shepherding. King David began as a shepherd. Not a few of the prophets began as shepherds. These courageous people understood their role with the flock, understood the flock, and translated it into a metaphor to talk about those who led people and/or the people themselves. One of the favorite biblical images is when David, who became seen as the best leader of the country --- saw himself as a sheep and God as his shepherd. Join on the bold font as we read responsively Psalm 23.

(R – Reader, **C – Congregation**)R: The LORD *is* my shepherd;**C: I shall not want.**

R: He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

**C: He restores my soul;**

R: He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

**C: I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**

R: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

**C: You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.**

R: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;

**C: And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

Psalm 23 (NKJV)

**Music** In response to one of our favorites of David's many songs, to the tune of *What Child is This*, let's prepare our hearts for prayer by singing

**The King of Love My Shepherd Is  
(to tune of What Child Is This? (no refrain))**

Words: Henry W Baker, 1868 Music: 16<sup>th</sup> Cent. English Melody

1. The King of love my shepherd is,  
whose goodness faileth never.  
I nothing lack if I am his,  
and he is mine forever.
2. Where streams of living water flow, my ransomed soul he leadeth;  
and where the verdant pastures grow, with food celestial feedeth.
3. Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed, but yet in love he sought me;  
and on his shoulder gently laid, and home, rejoicing, brought me.
4. In death's dark vale I fear no ill, with thee, dear Lord, beside me;  
thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.
5. Thou spreadst a table in my sight; thy unction grace bestoweth;  
and oh, what transport of delight from thy pure chalice floweth!
6. And so through all the length of days, thy goodness faileth never;  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house forever.



## Prayers

Loving Shepherd, you lead and guide, you walk alongside, you prepare, you feed, you call, all of your sheep, even those of us who are lost, those of us who stray constantly, those of us who stay close to your comforting staff.

We are grateful for the lush green pastures of our lives, and we give our thanks as we name some of these blessings in our hearts.... (Pause)

But there are also many who walk in the shadows of fear and suffering and despair, and loss. and we offer our prayers for the broken and bleeding places in this world, be it across the world or close to home, or in our personal lives. We name these needs in our hearts... (Pause)

**Petitions** Specifically today, we pray for \* Pat Schleh's friend Elaine who has stomach issues, for Jan Martin, who has a long way to go although she is feeling much better, for those who are under the weather, \* for those facing uncertain futures for a variety of reasons, \*for our families and friends in our church and community and beyond, hear these we name now in our hearts... (Pause).

O Loving Shepherd, we have all we need in you, and as we live as you taught us to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

portions ad. from Rev Karla's prayer inspired by Psalm 23 and John 10, revgalblogpals.org

## Intro to and Responsive Bible Reading 2

Jesus sees a man who had been born blind. Jesus teaches his disciples that the popular theology of the day was wrong – that disabilities are not a God-given punishment for sins of the parents or the child in the womb. Then he gives the blind man sight. Neighbors eventually recognized him as the one who was blind. They brought him to the Pharisees. They were divided over the event. But some were not happy that he was saying Jesus healed him, and that the healing took place on a Sabbath.



During a high-pressure interrogation of the healed man -- and his parents – first trying to find fraud in the alleged miracle. Failing that, they tried to get him to deny Jesus, who they claimed was a sinner. But the man insisted, first that Jesus was a prophet, and then he was from God, for if he weren't, he would not be healed.

In response, these religious leaders hurled insults at him and shortly after they accused him (on the basis of that popular theology) of being steeped in sin at birth, and then they threw him out.

When Jesus heard this, he found the man and invited him to believe and worship in God and in himself. Jesus tells him that he came to give sight to those who can't see and to reveal that those who claim to see are the blind ones.

(Summary of John 9)

And then he begins to tell the Pharisees several parables about shepherds and sheep. For the sake of time and emphasis, we'll summarize these key thoughts. Join on the bold print.

(R – Reader, **C – Congregation**)

R: Jesus said, "People who don't enter into God's flock by the gate are thieves and robbers. A real shepherd walks right up to the gate, and the guard lets him in because he is authorized to do so. He calls his sheep by name and leads them.

**C: Sheep listen for and recognize the shepherd's voice and follow him. They do not recognize, run away from, and certainly do not follow voices they do not know.**

R: The hired hand is not the shepherd. He does not own the sheep. When the flock is attacked, he saves himself and doesn't care about the sheep.

**C: Therefore, when danger comes, the sheep are scattered.**

R: But Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He knows his sheep, and his sheep know him. He calls them by name. He leads them out and they follow him because they know him.

**C: The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**

R: He invites and brings other sheep who will also listen to his voice.

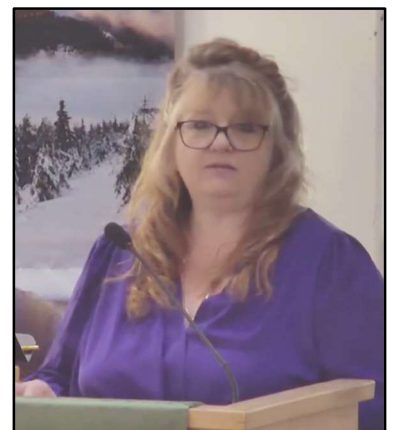
**C: Then there shall be one flock and one shepherd.**

R: Jesus is the Gate (who lays across the entrance of the sheep pen). Anyone who enters through him will be saved. Sheep will come in and go out and find pasture. All others are thieves and robbers who have come only to steal and kill and destroy.

**C: But Jesus has come that we may have a full and abundant life.**

(Summary of John 10:1-18)

**Music** Jesus invites us and all people to enter his kingdom, his courts, his pasture, through himself, the shepherd gate, to receive a joy-filled, and eternal life. Let's sing He has Made Me Glad



## He Has Made Me Glad

Words-Music: Leona Von Brethorst,  
© 1976 Maranatha Praise, Inc, adm. by the Copyright Co.

I will enter his gates with thanksgiving in my heart,  
I will enter His courts with praise.  
I will say, "This is the day that the Lord has made."  
I will rejoice for he has made me glad  
He has made me glad, he has made me glad.  
I will rejoice for he has made me glad--.  
He has made me glad, he has made me glad.  
I will rejoice for he has made me glad.  
Repeat

### Theme

We are starting a new series today called "Enemies of Abundant Living". Today's introduction to the series is not, but the rest of this worship series is inspired by E Stanley Jones, who was a Methodist Missionary to India, and friend with Ghandi. Jones wrote a biography about him after he died that influenced Martin Luther King's approach to his work in civil rights. His book which provides the topics of this series is called Abundant Living in which Jones' describes 15 enemies of life.

Now let's talk about sheep. In modern culture, and I suspect especially in America, sheep has become a negative image used to describe people who are mindlessly stampeding the world with their errant views because they are, without thinking, following the voice of a bad leader, or a group, or conspiracy leader, or "the powers that be", or \_\_\_\_\_ - fill in the blank. Ironically, the people who make this claim are just as often accused of doing the exact same thing, they are just mindlessly listening to a different voice. It cuts both ways. And the reason is, often, that it is a lot easier to label someone or something and then dismiss them than it is to delve into the topic of disagreement.

In the Bible, King David began as a shepherd, as did not a few of the prophets. They lived and knew what that life was like. When they talked about it, it wasn't careless caricature stereotyping. Shepherding and sheep became a strong metaphor for life in their world because it was so much a part of their community that almost everyone could understand it and relate to it, and whatever point was made from it.

Jesus talks about the sheep and the people who watched them. He names the qualities of the sheep: they listen to the shepherd, and they run from others. This

first imagery is based on the idea that some pens in some communities were large and held multiple flocks together in them. When an authorized shepherd went in, only that shepherd and only his sheep knew each other and only those sheep would follow that shepherd out into pasture. It was a multi-cultural world co-existing nicely together. Jesus expanded the imagery to say that some unauthorized shepherds have gotten in -- not through the gate -- but by jumping over the wall...

Followers of Jesus are often accused of mindlessness – They equate our faith as blindly following fantasies that has no basis in reality. Yet the Bible says faith in the unseen future is not built on wishful thinking, but upon the history, the track record, of all of God's actions (and the actions of his faithful people at their best), and Jesus says his sheep, his people, are meant to be smart and good at discerning who their real leaders are -- versus those who try to win that leadership over them, not by example, but with empty promises, charisma, or ideas that sound good but are grounded in nothing, or even worse, in falsehood.

Sheep, and people, are social beings. We are designed to be interdependent. Not co-dependent, but interdependent. We rely on God and each other for our health, protection, and well-being. We all need relationships with others who will mutually care, guide, love, and are willing to sacrifice for each other. That is why the prophets got upset when people acted like those handful of sheep who were the self-centered bullies of the flock, looking out only for themselves and not caring what they were doing to anyone else in the process. (See Ezekiel 34:17-24 (but see wider context vv 7-31 for a comparison with the Good Shepherd) We are to act like the true shepherd acted for us – to care for each other, and to call each other gently back when we have wandered off from what is good for us. (See Galatians 6:1 ff)

When we follow God through Jesus, and follow Jesus' example as we live with others, this is when we enter the gate to abundant living. In one parable, unauthorized people are hopping the fence to lead us astray – Jesus says we will discern their falsehood and we run because we will not recognize their voice. In another parable, the pen is solid, and none can hop over the wall -- the only way in or out is through a small opening in one of the 4 walls – an opening in which the shepherd lays across it – so nothing could get in or out that pen without the shepherd knowing about it. The sheep are safe, and they live fully, without danger. They have an abundant life.

Does that mean all our relationships will always be happy? Hmm. Does it mean

a nice home and cars and boat and ice fishing shanty and a heated hunting blinds? Does it mean we can always afford the latest technology we *think* we need? Does it mean that there will be no financial worries? Does it mean that temptation will never come, or can be easily defeated if it does? Does it mean that we will never be sick? (Cough, I guess not 😊) That we will never have a crisis come our way? Experience, and the Bible, tell us that this just isn't true. There are many very committed Christians, who have entered the door, enjoyed the pasture - and yet have not always experienced some or any of these things I have named because these things are not the things, in and of themselves, that make life full. Yet Jesus says, I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly, or to the full, or, as David said in Psalm 23 – our cup, spirit, life – overflows, which, if taken too literally, can mean a messy life ... but it overflows with God's presence and his shalom – his completeness, wholeness, his contented peace, his joy no matter what the circumstance..

Jesus calls us to listen to his voice. His people will recognize his voice and follow him. If you find that you have somehow wandered off, or even if you haven't, hear the great shepherd, who laid down his life for us, calling us to him, to come nearer to his cross and bleeding side so that we can receive his much-needed care.

**Music** ML: Jesus calls us to hear his voice and follow his lead as the good and true shepherd... Let's sing...

### # 338 (v 1) Where He Leads Me

Words: E.W. Blandy, 1890 Music: John S. Norris, 1890

1. I can hear my Savior calling, I can hear my Savior calling,  
I can hear my Savior calling, "Take thy cross and follow, follow me."

#### Refrain

Where he leads me I will follow, where he leads me I will follow,  
where he leads me I will follow; I'll go with him, with him all the way.

**Music** Now if you are comfortable, let's sing about his guidance and much needed care...

### Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us

Text: Attr. to Dorothy A. Thrupp, 1836; Music: William B. Bradbury, 1859

1. Savior, like a shepherd lead us, much we need thy tender care;  
in thy pleasant pastures feed us, for our use thy folds prepare.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast bought us, thine we are.



Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast bought us, thine we are.

2. We are thine, thou dost befriend us, be the guardian of our way;  
keep thy flock, from sin defend us, seek us when we go astray.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Hear, O hear us when we pray.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Hear, O hear us when we pray.

3. Thou hast promised to receive us, poor and sinful though we be;  
thou hast mercy to relieve us, grace to cleanse and power to free.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! We will early turn to thee.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! We will early turn to thee.

4. Early let us seek thy favor, early let us do thy will;  
blessed Lord and only Savior, with thy love our bosoms fill.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast loved us, love us still.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast loved us, love us still.

## **Sermon Shepherd of Abundance** (or “**Swindlers, Servers, Shepherds, and the Sheep who Follow Them.**”)

Terri (the reader) told us -- Jesus healed a man blind from birth. Some religious leaders tried to deny that that was a reality. Failing that, they then tried to deny it was a Godly act, especially since it was work done on the Sabbath, and moreover, these leaders had already predetermined that anyone who professed Jesus as God’s chosen would be thrown out of the faith group. In the end, Jesus says they are blind to the truth. They hear this comment, which leads to him telling a barrage of sheep-shepherd images, which we kind of mashed up into a stew, so I’d encourage you to read John 10:1-18 in its full order at your earliest opportunity, and John 9 which led to these stories (now, this is not your earliest opportunity. 😊) But sometime



this afternoon. Some of the application I am going to make will expand on the application of exactly what Jesus was talking about. It may also include some applications of what might be going on today. So, it won’t be just what the Pharisees (who he was talking to) were doing, but also other (modern) people who may fall into – for example, our first group of thieves and robbers.

## Thieves and Robbers

We've already talked about the sheep. Now let's talk thieves and robbers. They are leaders who have come in among the people; but not out of care and not out of love.

Jesus gives them two primary characteristics: 1) They do not enter by the Gate. In other words, they offer an eternal life that they have not received. They talk the game but do not live it. They know their Bible thoroughly, (or whatever philosophy they are teaching) but do not know or understand the God behind the words.

They are there to get what they want from the people, so they entice them with whatever is tempting to the people. So if we find self-denial for the purposes of avoiding evil, doing good, and gathering with like believers a difficult and problematic solution to life (those are the Methodist, Joh Wesley's three prongs of faith – do good, avoid evil, and stick together); they offer us more a more enticing, enjoyable philosophies hedonism (pleasure), legalism (control everyone else), or relativism (rationalizing doing whatever you want in any given situation) self-help or miracle cures for anything and everything, or tapping into some great nebulous power of the Universe -- Robbers will construct these or whatever rules or programs that they think they are sensing that they can get the people to chase. Now, there is nothing wrong with trying to present ourselves in ways that are appealing – don't get that confused. – so that we will increase the chances of someone responding positively to us and to God. (Thus, the survey we have in our bulletin about what we can do to enhance our church building to increase our quality of programming!) It becomes wrong when we compromise who we are, or lie about who God is (putting promises in God's mouth that he never made), for example. But these people stop at nothing -- they will use *any* method that will get the sheep -- us -- to enjoy, believe, and willingly surrender our lives *to them* and *their cause instead of God's...* They are diverting people from God to themselves – that is theft and that is why they are called robbers. While we cannot, nor do we want to control how other people react to us, each of us is responsible for how we present ourselves – so we should ask ourselves -- **Do any of my words and actions hinder myself or others from the full life that Christ offers?**

2) This is important to ask ourselves because Jesus says they are not only thieves who do not enter by the gate – their second characteristic is that they come to destroy. You conquer by dividing, by tearing down. They may do it knowingly, deliberately; or they may have the best of intentions and not realize they are teaching false philosophies, doctrines, or belief systems. They may offer promising

strategies to life, may even seem and feel good for a time, but ultimately, they do not add true *spiritual* nourishment -- they take it away and smother it. Robbers and Thieves.

### Hired Hands

Second, we have the hired hands. The characteristics of the hired hand may be a little better. Is there a correlation to the story of the blind man being healed and all the reaction to it? Perhaps some of the Pharisees who are named as disagreeing with the ones who led the charge against Jesus and this cured man – because after all – he was cured! So maybe this isn't the right path to go. But then they disappeared from the story – apparently, perhaps, they decided it wasn't worth the fight? Or perhaps it is about the parents who were called in, but were afraid to answer because they didn't want to get kicked out, even though they knew the answer? Maybe Jesus is talking about the people who aren't necessarily the top leaders, but still have responsibilities? Maybe there is no correlation at all. Nevertheless, the characteristics -- Jesus says is that hired hands 1) are not owners. They do not possess the truth; and do not consider themselves responsible for it... They haven't invested themselves in it - and so they 2) (second characteristic) they run at the first sign of trouble because they do not deeply care for who they are hired to care for. They are in it only for what they can get out of it, and if the benefits lag behind the effort and struggle, they will move on quickly because what they are doing is merely professional or superficial or wrongly motivated rather than a deep, personal commitment.

Now sometimes people move on, and it is not necessarily because of this. We need to keep that clear to.

Anyone who works with others in any context, know that some are more committed than others are. Let me get at it this way: when I waited tables at three different locations, 2 were at the same brand of restaurant, a lower end sit down restaurant chain – no longer in business, and one was Mr. T's, a local family owned restaurant in Iron River; it was pretty easy to tell who owned the store and who didn't. It wasn't just Mr. T and his family.

Some workers, even though all they got was a wage, worked as if it were "their store". They did their very best, wanting to please the boss and the customers and do their very best for the company so it can prosper, and they can feel good about who they are and what they do. They took pride and joy in the restaurant's successes and shame and pain in its failures. You can barely distinguish them from

the owners because they have taken ownership of their job. They invested themselves' in the place's future. They were the ones who made it the cleanest and gave its customers the best service, no matter what kind of tip they were going to get (or not get) from that customer.

Other hired hands are there only for the paycheck and their goal was to do as little as possible to keep getting it. Not that there is anything wrong with getting a paycheck or receiving rewards. I hope we all are getting something of great value for our connection to this place and other organizations and groups with whom we are involved. We should! I am not talking about that. These people don't care if the boss likes them or if the business prospers. In fact, they probably would prefer it barely ekes along because then they wouldn't have to do as much. If they ever gave good service, it was because they were hoping for a big tip. And if they knew someone didn't give good tips, they would try to not wait on those people, but if they had to, they didn't bother giving them good service. How do you discern which is which? By what are their normal patterns of words and actions over time. Here's how I got a clue about one cook – he spent his time catching flies so he could microwave them. Along with other patterns, I was guessing he was probably not one who took a vested interest (ownership) in that restaurant.

I went through a drive-through recently. There was no one in the drive through line, so I assumed it was not busy. I do not think they were closed, though I noticed last night that their menu sign stays lit up all night whether they are open or not. But I do not think they were closed, and I sat at the ordering sign microphone for longer than I think I should have need to wait... so I finally gave up and drove through. As I drove forward, I looked into the restaurant and there were some customers eating in the lobby, so if they were no longer open, customers were keeping them there, and I saw a couple employees standing about 5-6 feet apart talking to each other. They never saw me. I just kept on driving. But also know, we are all human, and at any given unfortunate moment, we might let down what we normally are. Therefore, we should be quick to give the benefit of the doubt and very slow to evaluate and draw condemning conclusions. Like I said, I've waited tables – sometimes we just have a bad moment, or hour, or day, or more... sometimes people are struggling with personal issues that distract them from being their best and we will never know about it. This is why I said their "normal pattern of words and actions over time", as you get to know them. Then you *might* learn to know what *might* be normal, and what *might* be the exceptions. Better yet though, just don't try judging at all... that is best.

So as hired hands, as volunteers, as participants in this church or at your job or other volunteer organizations, family, friends, recreation, etc... **What kind of “ownership” (or not) does my life reveal? Do I fully invest my life as someone who owns and is responsible for how I live out my life, my faith, and to those organizations to whom I have committed myself?**

### The Shepherd, shepherds

Those who do, fall into our last category of person – the shepherd. Jesus pictures himself as the Good

Shepherd. The shepherd's leadership and authority are rooted in his care for the sheep. Jesus lists more characteristics for this category than the other ones.

First, 1) They have authority. True Christians walk up to the gate, and are allowed in. It is like the sign on a door that says, "Authorized personnel only". Some people like to walk into places that they are not authorized to go, in fact, if they see a sign like that, it is the first place they want to go. Just because they do doesn't mean they are authorized to do it. We've already talked about them, so we'll just move on. The people who have received proper authority are the ones who are in an authentic relationship with God through Jesus Christ and who truly care for others. 2) Second, they know their people. They are always in the process of getting to know others better. We hear their voice, they hear ours. We know each other (even if, for a minute, we don't quite place each other in the store -- I did that this week. ☺). And because people experience that genuine care, they will recognize and listen and respond by seriously considering the truth these caring people offer. Having said that, 3) third, they lead -- and do not push and demand. Those representing Christ with genuine care do not forcefully drive or manipulate people to get their *own* agenda met -- they lead by word and example and encouragement, sometimes strong encouragement, to get a higher agenda, God's agenda, met. And 4) fourth, they lay down their life. Authentic Christians are deeply committed to loving God and caring for others and they invest their lives in that. Their motivation is the loving call and command of God, and their true compassion for people causes a great willingness to sacrifice in all things little and big.

This includes 5) fifth and finally, looking to welcome new ones. Christians are always looking for people without a faith home to find a new home. Remember the context? The blind man was rejected and kicked out of one faith. Jesus sought him out and invited him to join him. And Jesus said within his imagery, then, "I must call people of other pens too", (that would be us Gentiles) so that there is one flock and one shepherd and life will be safe and secure and full and abundant for all.

Over 100 years ago, Joseph Parker compared the thieves' destruction with the shepherds' ongoing construction of a full life: Nothing is as easy as destruction. It can take years to build a bridge – (or months to fix one). But with dynamite, it takes only a few minutes to bring it back down. It can take a lifetime to build character - how long does it take to destroy it? We are in the process of being built up by God and God's people (building each other up) as a powerful people of faith. How long and how few does it take to destroy those efforts? making the Shepherd have to start all over again? From what I've seen over the years, not too many for not too long...

The thief has come to rob and kill and destroy - that is the easy work. Christ has chosen the hard work, the noble work, the work of building a new life. And that *process* is called the abundant life. Are we willing to follow where He leads to the rich pastures of full living? Even if it includes going up or down unpleasant, dangerous paths? Paths which can be successfully traversed only by a total trust in our God and a commitment to self-denial? Are we willing to hear, to discern, to listen, to follow?

The full life. I'll highlight the peak ideas of what someone described as this full life. It includes 1) the true richness of life - those things that happen that cause us to think we are a truly blessed people, something that goes far beyond or may not even include material things -- it goes beyond that to relationships, and to grace, and to mutual support, and to faith, and to joy, and to hope that hopes against all hopes.

It includes 2) the excitement of life. The Christian way of life is not, as some people claim, intolerably dull and boring (it is not supposed to be), a repressing of everything we like to do, a forcing of oneself to comply with what nobody would wish or could wish, a discipline that sucks the joy and excitement out of life - or if it doesn't, we ought to repent because we are enjoying something. Some people view Christianity that way. That is the version of a belief system that thieves and robbers bring - it promises much but destroys life; and saps our motivations and energies.

Yes, there is self-denial. We deny ourselves trivial pursuits as well avoiding jumping into life's pitfalls so that we can spend our time doing what is really valuable, productive, meaningful, and beneficial to us and others. A life bogged down in trivialities may be a busy, diverted life, but not a full life. Christ offers an adventurous, exciting life.

And it may also include 3) setbacks and struggles. We already talked about how the abundant life doesn't dismiss all that out of our life. If we truly believe God has sent us to serve his world, well that world is a pretty contaminated, and contagious, and can be a dark place. It isn't always fun to get in the trenches and truly care for and be with and help people who sometimes don't want your help or encouragement for whatever reasons, or to care for people who are overwhelmed by the events brought on by the dark side of human living, self-inflicted, other inflicted, or inflicted by life in general. It is more than they can handle, and it is more than we can handle. The process of those crises that we face may cause us to lean a little more heavily on the gracious strength of God, the one who is with us even "through the valley of the shadow of death, encouraging us to fear no evil -- for God is there to save us on those treacherous paths up and down the hills -- moving from pasture to pasture, from season to season -- as we move toward, and grow toward, fertile pastures.

Like I said in a recent sermon, the question is not "are you one of these three things, the question is when are we which in each area of our life? When are we a robber, a thief? When are we just hired hands? When are we true shepherds? Let's move toward being true shepherds more and more in our life.

## **Prayer**

Let's pray. Lord, once we were lost sheep with no idea of who you were or where you were going. But no longer. Through Jesus Christ, we have been set right with God. This Great Shepherd carried our sins to the cross, he bled so that we could be free to live the right way. One of the most powerful pictures of Christ as the Shepherd pictures the shepherd torn and bleeding on a treacherous cliff -- in order to reach out and save the life of one lamb that had got himself in deep and dangerous trouble. The wounds he suffers to pull us from the dangers of death. His wounds become our salvation and healing.

Lord, you are, and give, more than we can ever imagine. In this hope of abundant life: give us a wider vision of the world; a broader view of justice; give us dreams of peace that are not defined by boundaries of geography or race or religion, or by the limitations of worldly structures and systems. Open our eyes and our ears so that wherever we go, we may hear your voice calling us by name; calling us to serve, calling us to share, calling us to praise, so that we never give up on the promise of your kingdom, and all can enjoy life in all its fullness. We pray this in

the name of the One who calls us by name, the Shepherd of our souls, who keeps us for good – meaning, “to do good”, and “for all time”. And it is in his name that we pray, Amen.

ad. from Assurance after Confession based on 1 Peter 2 (MSG)  
and by Joanna Harader on spaciousfaith.com and chistianaid.org.uk

**Music** For our final song, the imagery changes from shepherding and sheep to fishing and fish – but the meaning is the same.... We are to be shepherding sheep or “fishering” fish – in either case, we listen and follow God’s call through Jesus, and we follow his example and do the same as Jesus did for the sake of Christ and the sake of others. Let’s sing...

### **Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore**

Words: Cesareo Gabarain; trans. by Gertrude C. Suppe, George Lockwood, and Raquel Gutierrez-  
Music: Cesareo Gabarain; harm. by Skinner Chavez Melo, 1987

1. Lord, you have come to the lakeshore  
looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones;  
you only asked me to follow humbly.  
O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,  
and while smiling have spoken my name;  
now my boat’s left on the shoreline behind me;  
by your side I will seek other seas.

3. You, need my hands full of caring  
through my labor to give others rest,  
and constant love that keeps on loving.  
O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,  
and while smiling have spoken my name;  
now my boat’s left on the shoreline behind me;  
by your side I will seek other seas.

**Announcement...** Before the blessing, we have one announcement to make, which I’ll make short and sweet. Some of you have been wondering about my status. After much deliberation and discernment seeking, and deeply mixed emotions and reasonings, the decision has been officially made that I will be retiring from pastoral ministry at the end of June. The bishop, cabinet, and especially your District Superintendent Rev. LuAnn Rourke will be working with Mary Jo Bell, our SPRC Chair and that committee to find a good and affordable fit for you come July.



MaryJo Bell (SPRC Chair): I just want to say that I know that this decision was not easy for you, and I ask that we all pray for him and his family as they look for housing up [north] close to more snow. 😊 Just continue to pray for him and his family and our church over the next few months as we transition for this, and I want to thank you, pastor, for all that you do and have done for us.



**Blessing** Now as we go, know that day by day, God leads us to deep pools of peace and to the green, lush lawns of grace. Know that day by day, Jesus calls us to pour ourselves into service, to anoint others with hope and love. Know that day by day, the Holy Spirit shows us the community we could be and the family we are called to become. Now go to follow, to serve, and become in the power of the Spirit, the name of Jesus Christ, and to the glory of God our Father. Amen.

ad. from "Call or Worship based on Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24"  
by Thom Shuman, [lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.com](http://lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.com)