

Aug. 11, 2019

Ps. 25:1-7; John 10:1-10 /

Life Abundant or Why God made fireflies.

The Lord be with you. It is good to be here with you today, to share with you a little about myself through a sermon but mostly I trust that the words spoken this morning may be encouraging and uplifting as well as we turn our attention toward God.

Ever since I was a little boy and I heard these words from John 10:10, that Jesus has come that I might have life and have it abundantly, or to the fullest, it has captured my imagination. What does that mean? I've watched, in my lifetime, perhaps you have too, as this passage, in our consumer obsessed society, has been misinterpreted and misused by prosperity gospel preachers to mean that you shouldn't be poor or sick, that the struggles, the pain, the tragedies of this life should not touch you. It is almost as if God is just some big vending machine in the sky, giving you the desires of your heart.

I hope that is not the case because that makes God a very small God in my eyes. A God that is defined by us is really no God at all. And so while I'm a firm believer that Jesus has come to save us from sin, as I reflect on my life and as I think about others I've walked with, it is clear to me that Jesus has also come to save us at times... from ourselves as well. And so I'm pretty sure that the vending machine God is not what Jesus means here when he says, "life to the fullest."

I find it helpful, as I study scripture, to take a step back, sometimes more than one step, and take a look. So let's do that for a moment and think about the context of this passage. If you take some time to look at commentaries you begin to realize just how layered this small passage of scripture is and I'm obviously not going to touch on everything but there are a few things that I want to draw to our attention to this morning that I hope will be helpful.

The first step back reveals that these words of abundant life / life to the fullest are in contrast to the phrase that comes before, about the thief who comes to steal, kill and destroy. Those words sound familiar right now and I find myself wondering what that means today as we live in a time and country in which fear of the other is being weaponized, whether you are talking about folks from other countries, or other races or cultures or even another political party. We are told that we should fear the other because they have bad intentions toward us and our way of life.

Or what does this mean if these are not just some hypothetical words that people are using to agitate? That we have personally been on the receiving end of these type of actions. That we have personally experienced this kind of fear and trauma?

And I look again at this first layer and realize that what the crux of this is about is a way forward, a way through the attempts to diminish the fullness of our lives as God's children. And so I wonder what that might look like?

The next step back finds Jesus describing himself as the gatekeeper or the gate for the sheep. As we pass through him we find pasture....we find life, we find peace. It's reminiscent of what is found in the 23rd Psalm.... of the green pastures, still waters....souls at rest, at peace. It's a wonderful image.

But yet if we take a step back even further we find that this passage is also a part of the great "I am" statements that Jesus makes in the gospel of John. You've heard these before.....

"I am the bread of life.....

I am the light of the world.....

I am the gate for the sheep....

I am the good shepherd.....

I am the resurrection and the life.....

I am the way the truth and the life....

I am the vine and you are the branches

"I tell you the truth...before Abraham was born.... I am" Jn. 8:58

And that compels me to take yet one more step back and in so doing find that the term "I Am" relating to God appears over 300 times in the Bible. From Genesis 15 down to Rev. 22. God is the great "I Am" we are told. And a question forms. "I am." Is it the personal name of God as in God wears a name tag that says "Hello, I am I AM"? Or is "I Am" an expression of the quality of God's being? As in, I Am, a Being that was before time and beyond time but I choose to be active and dynamic and present in the present time.

"I am the gate through which you pass so that you might have life to the fullest." And the Jewish ears hearing Jesus, there would be one of two reactions. One, the religious leaders would have seen this as blasphemous, Jesus referencing himself as God and it would get Jesus in a whole lot of trouble. But that is a whole other sermon.

The other group would have understood what Jesus was saying here because they were longing for this. God is present, here, and now, someone who is active and dynamic....so that you might have life...fully because life was really hard.

And when Jesus says "I am" I think it is also important to understand that these "I am" statements are not about Jesus tooting his own horn. They are descriptive in that they are prescriptive for what we need. "I am, because, well Terry, quite frankly, you are not." It is not that I am "less than" for I am of incredible worth to God...same as you. It is just that I can't be....what I need. I can't be the shepherd when I'm a sheep that is lost and broken, hurting. I can't be the vine when I'm a branch that has been wounded, unable to produce the fruit of the Spirit. I can't be the savior when I can't save even myself. "I AM, Terry, because you are not."

But we sure can act like it sometimes. We act as if we are the great "I am" as we allow our wealth, our education and self-sufficiency to give us a false sense of worth, security, control in this world. We act as if we are the great "I am" when words of judgement pass over our tongues onto the "other" so that we might feel better about ourselves and alleviate our fears. We can too easily act as if we are the great "I Am." But in the end, we are not. We are not.

Jesus has come to save us, sometimes from ourselves. Because the one who comes to diminish the fullness of our lives as God's children can so easily distract us and we are sheep in need of a shepherd. That is the context of this passage. We are sheep in need of a shepherd. Now let me transition to how this might apply for us today, at least how I have experienced this passage recently.

I don't know about you, but I've been feeling distracted these past months. The news surrounding our political leaders and what they are espousing, what they are doing or have not been doing has been, to say the least disappointing and discouraging if not downright infuriating. My spirit has not been a good place. I've allowed that to happen as I've let myself be open to the same anger and hatred that I've seen and condemned in others. I've wanted to respond to those espousing hatred of the other with hate for the one who is doing the hating. And the irony of that has not escaped me.

Hatred for another is no small thing. All the way back to Cain and Able, where it leads us to, where it ends up at it is no small thing. And so it should have been no surprise to me that the responses arising from within me were anything but life giving. God seemed distant. Life, anything but abundant. The one who came to diminish the fullness offered in Christ...seemed to be succeeding in my own life. I know I'm not the only one struggling like this. I hear it in way too many conversations. I've witnessed it in way too many lives as we are touched and harmed by the broken-ness of this world. But fortunately, God doesn't give up or let go of us. Could I see it? In spite of it all, could I see it? Was there a way forward?

If there is a spiritual discipline that is alluded to here in this passage it is this. Attentiveness. Or maybe you don't think of that as a spiritual discipline. I do...a tremendously important one. Because the one who seeks to diminish the fullness often times distracts. Sometimes it is found in the very real pain and fear we are experiencing. Sometimes it is more subtle like the smart phones that most of us have in our pockets and are too easily addicted to. But it is why God is constantly speaking, often right in front of us. And attentiveness is the answer. Could I see it....could I hear it? It will take attentiveness. Paying attention on my part.

A few weeks ago, we were out in Ohio at Cheryl's father's house around July 4th. He lives in the country a few miles outside of Orville, Ohio. Sitting on his front porch swing in the evening and night time, listening to the corn pop as it grows in the summer heat is always enjoyable to me. But on this particular evening as it turned to night, it wasn't the corn that had my attention. There were a couple of hundred of acres of fields in front of me and over these floated thousands and thousands of fireflies, flicking and flickering and flickering. I had never seen that many in one place before. Calling out to one another....doing what God had created them to do.

In the distant, over a line of trees several miles away toward the town of Orville, fireworks began to burst. These weren't the city fireworks for they were not supposed to happen until the next evening. These were individuals who had obviously spent hundreds, if not thousands of dollars to put on this display. And so for a few minutes in this area over here...boom, boom, wow. And then they were gone. And then for a few minutes, over here...and then they were gone. And so on until no one had anything left.

But the whole time while this was going on, the fireflies kept on doing their thing. Persistently, quietly flickering away, in the stillness of the night. Glorious. You know where I'm going with this, right? My eyes kept getting pulled back from the fireworks to the fireflies and it got to the point that I really didn't care about the fireworks. It was the fireflies that I wanted to watch. It was the fireflies that made me smile in wonderment and amazement, not the razzle-dazzle of the fireworks. It was the fireflies that made my spirit leap with gratitude, not the fireworks celebrating the holiday we are supposed to be grateful for.

It was the fireflies. And as this unfolded, the words formed on my lips as these thousands of fireflies did what God created them to do, "Wow God, you are incredible!" And a nudging from the Spirit...."Terry, be still and know that I am God." There's that "I Am" again. And a deep sense of peace and joy filled me. Abundance / Fullness! There it was!

"I am the gate" says Jesus. Through me is life. A little earlier he had said, "the sheep recognize the shepherd's voice and follow because they know his voice." That recognition is attentiveness. You know, sometimes fireflies are just fireflies, but in that moment, they were much more. I had paid attention to God's voice and I had walked through the gate; to the still waters, the green pasture. And my spirit was full. The circumstances that were so troubling to me, had they somehow magically changed? I wish, but no. What had changed was me.

"Teach me your ways, your paths" says the Psalmist. "Lead me in your truth and teach me. For you are the God of my salvation. For you I wait all day long." What had changed was that now, I, could pray, think, speak, and act more clearly, more God-like than when I was diminished. This isn't about feeling better about myself so I can stick my head in the sand to what is going on. No, this is about the fact that I didn't have to drink from the streams of dehumanizing hatred anymore because the streams of life-giving water had begun to flow in me again. God was trying to show me the way through and forward from the place I was stuck in.

I think this is one of the things that God is trying to do in this moment, in this place of history that we find ourselves. It feels like as a society, we are very stuck in a destructive pattern. And God is trying to save us from ourselves. God is trying to call us back to who we were created to be, to teach us about God's loving desire for creation in the face of what feels like such a polar opposite moment, so that we might respond with care and love to one another rather than hatred and a desire to diminish or destroy the other.

That's hard. In this moment, that is terribly hard. But then, it's hard to pay attention. Fear is running rampant for many and so much of life is subtle distraction for the rest of us, a spectacular

display like fireworks, here for a moment and gone. And then we move on to the next distraction and the next one without comprehending what has been stolen from us until we end up wondering where this anger and hatred came from.

But I take great comfort in the reality that is given to us in scripture; of the great "I am" who enters into those voids in our lives and offers us life, pasture, fresh water. Of the great "I Am" who is present in our moments, right in front of us, speaking, calling to us, sometimes in ways as ordinarily wonderful as fireflies. There it is. Right in front of me. There all along. I just couldn't see it. I wasn't paying attention. Fireflies. God's instrument of my restoration. Go figure. But it's how God seems to roll sometimes. So subtle.

"I have come that you may have abundant life, life to the fullest". Could it be that this abundance has nothing to do with self-indulgence excess but it is actually about restoration, what we need - more than what we want? I wonder. May we be graced with the gift of attentiveness in this coming week. God bless you. Amen.