

“To Flourish”

My family and I visited Ireland and the British Isles in 2016. While in Ireland we saw beautiful landscapes, castles and other historical sites. We also saw plenty of sheep in the fields. Ireland has five million people and fifteen million sheep. Sheep are important to the Irish economy; every heard of a wool sweater. There are plenty of woolen factories in Ireland.

With all those sheep, there is a need for good shepherds. One day when we were riding on the bus, we noticed that about five sheep had gotten out of the gates and were walking down the road. Somebody needed to guard their safety.

Two of our readings today are Psalm 23 and John 10. The image of sheep and shepherd were frequently used with metaphorical significance in the Old Testament. God is understood as the shepherd and God’s people are the sheep. God is the good shepherd who will rescue the sheep when needed. In John 10 Jesus is presented as the good shepherd who meets the needs of his sheep.

We are familiar with the popular image of Jesus as a shepherd. This pastoral image has influenced traditions, such as referring to an ordained minister as pastor and giving pastoral care to the minister’s congregation.

We often think of Psalm 23 as solace in the time of danger and getting through dark valleys. It can be that comfort. But today we focus on the positive image of what the shepherd does for the sheep. There is the intimacy of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep that is demonstrated by the sheep's ability to recognize the shepherd's voice and the shepherd's ability to call each sheep by its own name. Shepherds are known to actually have pet names for certain sheep. Because of this intimacy, the sheep will follow the shepherd.

The shepherd is the one who has authorized access to the gate. It is important that the sheep follow the shepherd through the gate so that they are not misled by anyone else. Thieves, bandits and strangers do not have access to the gate and can lead the sheep to danger or death. One's identity as a member of the flock is determined exclusively by one's relationship to Jesus at the gate. One enters the fold through Jesus.

Going through the gate brings salvation. Jesus is the means to salvation. But it is even more than eternal salvation. Jesus comes to bring life now. Those who come through Jesus find pasture; this signifies abundance of life. We recall Jesus' promises of water (John 4:14) and bread (John 6:35). Jesus provides.

Jesus is the way to life because he lays down his own life. In that freely chosen act of his death, Jesus shows the way to life (through the gate) and offers

abundant life by the example of his love. It is important that Jesus lays down his life for the sheep.

You will not find the words “I flourish” in Psalm 23 or in the Gospel accounts such as John 10 that trumpet the reality of a lavish provider offering more than enough for those in his care. But you will feel the full blast of a flourishing, abundant spirit. You may find such spiritual flourishing inappropriate in a time when too many have too little, when many are struggling with jobs, when many are struggling with sickness. But this is just the time to feel fine with God’s flourishing. To ignore David’s cup in Psalm 23 with its contents spilling all over the place is to dismiss the free, frolicking divinity behind it. Psalm 23 bids that we come to terms with feeling awfully blessed without feeling awful about it.

Feeling fine with flourishing positively and powerfully impacts our overall attitude towards life. Being fine with flourishing also unleashes a creative prowess and boldness that is otherwise unimagined and, therefore, unrealized. I am a fan of jazz music. I love listening to it and, in my freshmen year in high school, as part of a four man jazz group, I played the trombone. One of the songs we played was *Sweet Georgia Brown*. The beauty of jazz is that it allows one to improvise, to be creative. There are no set notes. The song can go many different directions.

I read a story in *Christian Century* the past week about the jazz pianist

Herbie Hancock. Hancock relates a story of playing a concert in the mid-1960s with the great trumpeter and jazz player Miles Davis. As they were playing, the band was like one entity, and they were hurdling towards Miles' solo, the audience on the edge of their seats. Miles starts playing, building up to his solo, and Hancock played a chord that was just so wrong in the wrong place, like a piece of rotten fruit, and Hancock thinks *Oh no*. But, in the greatness of Miles Davis, Miles pauses for a fraction of a second, and then he plays some notes that somehow miraculously make Hancock's chord sound right. Miles then took off from there, unleashing a solo that took the song in a new direction and beautiful music.

Jesus gives us the ability to flourish, to be abundant regardless of where we may be in our lives. In the final analysis, being fine with flourishing has less to do with how much you want and more with a heightened appreciation for the value of whatever you do have---for yourself and for others.

As we close, let us reflect that when we are living in God's overflow, there is an abiding sense of having what you need and always having enough to share. Appreciating what we have, rather than ruminating over what we don't have, allows us to abide freely and fully in ever-flourishing blessing.