[Play opening minute or two of “Sheep May Safely Graze”]

I’m sure many, if not all of you, know that piece by Bach. I remember the first time I learned the title. A parishioner in Aurora, Illinois, had died, and I was speaking by phone with one of his children in Chicago. She asked if our organist could play a Bach piece at the funeral, but she couldn’t remember the title.
I asked her to hum a few bars, which she did. It was familiar to me, but I had never known the title.

I said I was certain our organist was equal to the task. We finished our conversation; I called Meg, our organist, and dutifully hummed that same phrase to her. Immediately she said, “Oh! ‘Sheep May Safely Graze,’ and it fixed the title in my mind forever.

It’s an aria from Bach’s Cantata 208 (sometimes called the “Hunting Cantata”). As the title implies, it’s a secular cantata, and this aria is the most memorable part. After that funeral I found myself suggesting it on occasion for weddings and funerals.

It calls forth in me a sense of calm and well-being without schmaltz or saccharine.

Today’s readings put me in mind of it again. I’m pretty careful around here with what I say about sheep and goats, because there are experts among us, Rufus and Sandy, and they might not be the only ones.

Still, there’s no mistaking our Lord’s intention in his references to sheep and shepherd, and he himself, though no shepherd in the literal, conventional sense, drew on those images from Scripture (that part we now refer to as the Old Testament, as that was the only Bible Jesus and his companions knew).

In the end, as much as I’ve enjoyed and learned from commentary by shepherds and goatherds and farmers through the years, and as much as I have appropriated some of that lore and used it in sermons, we need to remember that Jesus uses these images to talk about those who cannot fully care for themselves. And that, of course, is all of us. More than that, he uses them to speak about God, who cares for us all.

It is easy to get caught up in the pastoral language of the twenty-third psalm and the “good shepherd” passage from John’s gospel and overlook the last line of both.

The end of psalm 23 is: “and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

And the gospel passage: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Every metaphor has its limitations, and this is no exception: we don’t really think that sheep aspire to living in anyone’s house, and Jesus clearly speaks of more here than green pastures and sufficient rain.

It’s all about abundant life.

And it’s not just in these two readings. It’s the whole of our Bible, the whole of our faith. The whole of our lives as people who believe in some power greater than ourselves, this question of abundant life.

The words abundant and abundantly show up 67 times in our English translation of the Bible. As I was looking at this, that thing that happens when we repeat a word over and over began to happen to me—it starts to sound nonsensical. So I did what I often do: I looked into its etymology. If I ever had known I had forgotten that abundant comes from the word “abound,” making its way into English in the late 1300s from French and Latin. Abundant means, literally, abounding or overflowing.

A perversion of Jesus’ promise of abundant life still extant today is known as the prosperity gospel or (a term I hadn’t heard) the health and wealth gospel. You’ve probably heard that touted on television.

It’s been around forever—the notion that poverty is a sign of God’s displeasure and curse, and wealth is a sign of God’ favor and blessing. How many people have been hurt by this through these twenty centuries of Christianity? The poor who have felt that God is against them and those who have tried and tried to earn proof of God’s love by becoming rich. And by those who, through hard work and luck and circumstances, have become wealthy have adopted an attitude of moral superiority because of that. That is as damaging in its own way to those folks as the other two categories of people.

So what is this life abundant of which Jesus speaks? Clearly, it is more about our attitude toward life than the circumstances of it. You and I have both known people with extremely limited resources who are genuinely content, even joyful, and others who have more than they’ll ever need who are constantly filled with anxiety and worry.

We know, of course, that people who don’t have shelter or sufficient enough food are unhappy for good reason, and an important part of our faith is to help such people to rise above that line of biting poverty. In fact our faithful efforts to help them is a factor in our own sense of the abundant life; we are happier ourselves when we contribute to the well-being of all.

But aside from those extreme cases, we have all known people who lead lives consistently marked by satisfaction, openness, and warmth. And let’s be clear: no one has that one hundred percent of the time. That’s called simply not paying attention.

Every single one of us, though, has had moments of awareness of having all that we need—not merely physically, but that sense of being at home in the world, in our families, in our own skin.

A dear friend of mine is dying in San Miguel as I speak to you. Russ Archibald is 98 or 99 and is finally succumbing to, I believe, coronary heart disease. He might not live out this day. He was Senior Warden of St. Paul’s when I was called to be rector there in 1997 and was so much more than that to me. I have fond memories of his generosity of spirit—helping me down a narrow cobblestone street with our three dogs on moving day, dealing with a spray of water on the roof of the rectory after a rare freeze . . . it’s a long list.

He lived life abundantly in the way Jesus intends us to understand that. He and his family contributed to the education of countless young people in far-flung places, not only the poor Mexicans in that last phase of his life. He organized and worked hard on the development of projects throughout the world—a pioneer in the field of modern project management.

More than anything else, though, Russ brought encouragement and affirmation to all the people around him. He possessed a rare and rich blend of intelligence, wit, and sensitivity. The abundant life part is that he never took that for granted. Of course he had down days like anyone I’ve ever known, and he was never simply a hail-fellow-well-met with a fake grin. His consistent and reliable response to any problem, any situation, was “how can I help?” whether he uttered those actual words or not.

My reason for indulging in these memories this morning is to say that Russ was one of those stellar examples of what it means to embody that abundant life brought to us by Jesus’ offering of himself.

Another limit of the sheep/shepherd metaphor is that we sheep are meant to shepherd each other. Jesus brought the whole of God’s infinite love and mercy into this world in the compact package of a real, live human being.

That is a way of describing the incarnation. Along with that is Paul’s image of all of us together being the Body of Christ, that is, the present incarnation of God in the twenty-first century, in this unique moment.

We are both sheep and shepherd. We are called to be the embodiment and the encouragement of the abundant life Jesus came to bring us. + + +