

An Abundant, Technicolor Life
John 10:22-30
April 17, 2016

Some of you might be aware that my wife, Lanell, is a middle school teacher. She teaches Theater. Just recently her school had a bunch of testing so she couldn't do her regular class work. So she decided to show them the film *The Wizard of Oz*. Most of these kids had never seen it. So she looked up some fun facts about the making of the movie. I'm sure most of you remember the film well, but here are some things that maybe you didn't know.

One of the most memorable things about the *Wizard of Oz* is how the movie goes from black and white when Dorothy is in Kansas, to that vibrant Technicolor when she lands in Oz. That was a new process back in 1939 and so they had to do a lot of quirky things behind the scenes to make that color pop on the movie screen. They needed so many lights on the set that the temperature while filming was always around 100 degrees. This was really tough on Burt Lahr who played the Lion because his costume was made of real lion pelts and weighed nearly 100 pounds. He would sweat buckets every day. There were two crew members assigned each night to try to get this sopping mess of a costume back in shape for shooting the next day. The bright green makeup used on Margaret Hamilton, the Wicked Witch, was actually toxic. Whenever she was in makeup, she was on a liquid diet, drinking through a straw to make sure she didn't ingest the poison in her makeup. And my favorite, it makes me laugh – when Dorothy and the gang get to Oz they ride in a cart pulled by a horse that keeps changing color – first purple, then orange, then yellow. This is the horse of a different color, right? The filmmakers used powered Jell-O on the horse to create that color, but that made filming difficult. Whenever they would start the camera rolling, the horse would try to lick himself to eat the Jell-O.

But it all worked for this tremendous effect of brilliant color in Oz in contrast to the simple black and white world Dorothy had just come from. You remember that scene, when her house has just landed, everything is in black and white and she opens the door of her house? Beyond it is this dazzling world of color. That contrast was a way to set these two worlds apart in a spectacular way.

Now I mention all of this because I believe that this wonderful film can give us some important insights – insights into our faith journey and insights into our relationship with the Lord. But let's begin that exploration by going back to the text we just read.

Our lesson comes from the 10th chapter of John, toward the end. But it's probably helpful to review what happens before our verses begin so we get some context around what Jesus is saying. In the earlier part of chapter 10, there are these Jewish people who are trying to figure out who he is. It doesn't tell us whether they are Pharisees or just regular folks. Either way, Jesus begins to describe himself using a metaphor. He calls himself the good shepherd and he contrasts himself with a hired hand tending the

sheep. When a wolf comes, the hired hand will turn and run. But the good shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep.

This clearly doesn't satisfy the Jews who are listening, and our lesson picks up with these people asking Jesus to tell them directly whether or not he is the Messiah. But Jesus doesn't give them a straight answer, because they won't believe it anyway. He returns to the shepherd metaphor and he says these wonderful words: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

This, of course, reaffirms our most foundational beliefs. Jesus, the good shepherd, laid down his life for us, the sheep. We hear the shepherd's voice and follow him, trusting and believing in the promises given to us. We will never perish because he gives us eternal life, and nothing can separate us from that. If you hear nothing else this morning, hear that. God, through his amazing grace and love, has redeemed you and brought you back to the fold. You will forever be a beloved member of God's flock, both in this world and the next. I can't think of any better news than that.

Now with all this talk this morning about shepherds this morning, I wonder if any of have been thinking about the name of our congregation. Many of you may not know that it was our founding pastor, Ron Meyer, who came up with the name Shepherd of Life back in 1978. The story goes that Pastor Ron wanted to come up with a name that no other Lutheran churches had. Now, the exact phrase "Shepherd of Life" is not found in the Bible anywhere. From what I can tell, the verses we have this morning are as close as we get to that phrase. Who knows, maybe Ron was inspired by these very scriptures. Whatever the case, there were many churches that had the word "shepherd" in their names, but Ron figured out that none had "Shepherd of Life." And so Ron chose that to be our unique name.

Maybe this is a good time to examine that name a bit more. Shepherd of Life. First of all, it's pretty clear who the shepherd is. Just lift your eyes and you'll see. But what about "life?" What life is that referring to? I would say that it's certainly referring to the eternal life promised in our Scripture this morning. The good shepherd lays down his own life, and he gives his sheep eternal life.

But there's another life it refers to as well. I say this because in the earlier part of John 10, during that section about the good shepherd, Jesus tells us of another thing the good shepherd provides. Here's what he says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus wants us to have an abundant life, and he's talking about the life we live now, here on this earth, not the life to come.

That sounds good, doesn't it? Who doesn't want an abundant life, right? But we need to explore what that really means. Does it mean that God wants us to accumulate a bunch stuff and in that abundance we'll find happiness? Some preachers might tell you that. But I think it's something else entirely.

So what is an abundant life? To answer that, I'm going to return to our stained glass window. Look at the panel in the lower right corner. Does that remind you of anything? It reminds me of the yellow brick road. So let's go back to the Wizard of Oz. I think it has a thing or two to say about what an abundant life is.

I'm sure you remember that each of the four main characters is searching for something. They all want to see the wizard so that he can provide that for them. The scarecrow needs a brain, the tinman a heart, the lion some courage, and Dorothy just wants to go home. But on the way, Dorothy is captured by the wicked witch and the three others go to rescue her. And in that process they exhibit the very things they think they don't have. The scarecrow thinks up the plan, the tinman is almost overwhelmed with his compassion for Dorothy, and the lion proves to be brave throughout. And so when it's revealed that the wizard is really just a man, he simply reminds each of them that what they were seeking was inside them all along.

And so, let me be the wizard for you. Let me confer to you this wisdom: the abundant life is inside you already. It's been there all along.

You have the brains to deeply and profoundly understand exactly what God has done for you. You know that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ you are now and will always be a child of God. This leads to an abundant, confident life.

You have the heart to feel the love that God has for you, and to feel the Spirit moving in your life, drawing you closer to God through prayer and worship. You have the heart to reflect God's love in the world around you. This leads to an abundant, compassionate life.

You have the courage to trust in God's promise to you when hard parts of life hit. When it feels like everything and everyone is conspiring against you, trying to convince you to trust in yourself and not God, you are brave enough to place your faith in the Almighty Creator of the universe. This leads to an abundant, peaceful life.

And so when lean into this abundant life, when we accept it with all of our being, we change. We no longer view the world through a black and white filter, filled mostly with drudgery and frustration, filled with chores and nasty neighbors and con men and tornadoes. The abundant life, lived fully in the joy of God's love, is a Technicolor dream world. What was once pale and dull now pops with life. Worry and anxiety and despair are replaced with joy and hope and peace. And don't be surprised if you begin see singing Munchkins, or dancing scarecrows, or even a horse of a different color. That's the life that God wants for us. That's the life God calls us into.

And we can't forget Dorothy, right? She simply wanted to go home. Just like us. When our days on this earth are finally over, the only thing we want at that point is to go home. To go back to our Lord. We hold fast to that promise that we will never perish, that no one will snatch us out of the Lord's hand, not even death. And when that last moment

comes, in less time than it takes to click your heels three times, we'll be there. God will welcome us home, wrapping his arms around us and never letting go.

Until that day comes, may God fill us each with the Holy Spirit and guide our steps – leading us through that black and white door, so that we may step out into our abundant, Technicolor life.