

# Not at all Sheepish

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

**Purpose:** To portray the abundant life as a confident and courageous life, rising beyond the challenges of the present moment and shaped within eternity.

The lectionary readings for today are decidedly “sheepish”. There are sheep just about everywhere you turn. The Psalm is Psalm 23. We will be singing that Psalm after my sermon this morning. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” So in the background of the Psalm we imagine sheep. Then the epistle writer reminds us of some who had “gone astray like sheep” but who now have returned to Jesus who is “the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” And the gospel, well in the gospel there are sheep all over the place. Thieves and bandits sneak into the sheepfold, but the gatekeeper shepherd can call the sheep by name and they will come to him. “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says in the verse that follows immediately after today’s gospel reading. Like I say, there are sheep all over the place in today’s gospel lectionary.

I looked up my dictionary. It tells me that the word “sheepish” means “bashful or embarrassed.” That doesn’t sound like the sheep I know. As I lead worship this morning in my woollen Glen Innes tie and my ultra-fine merino wool shirt, my mind goes back to the green fields of the New England Tableland. There were sheep everywhere there as well and the words “bashful and embarrassed” are not the words that come first to my mind.

Drive past those New England sheep and they look up at you with a curious gaze as if to say: “What are you doing here?” Some of those New England sheep are pretty pampered. Drive south from Armidale near the village of Kentucky you’ll see them standing around in their little waistcoats munching contentedly on the pastures. They wear those little waistcoats to protect them from the prickles so that the wool stays as clean and pristine as the New England streams. But, let me assure you that “bashful and embarrassed” are not the words that come immediately to mind when you drive past those pampered sheep.

Nor are they the words that come to mind for me as I contemplate the last verse in today’s gospel reading. “The thief comes to steal and destroy,” Jesus says. That’s the one who sneaks into the sheepfold. They are up to no good. They come with malice in their hearts and evil intent. The sheep will flee from these sneaky no-good strangers. But he is the good shepherd. Those who follow him know his voice and he comes, Jesus says, “that they may have life and have it abundantly.” An abundant life, Jesus says. “I came that they may have an abundant life” and to be frank that doesn’t sound at all “sheepish” to me.

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But what is this abundant life that is God's gift to us this morning?

A wealthy merchant heard a rumour that the inhabitants of a distant island had more gold than they knew what to do with. So he hires a boat, fills it with onions which he plans to swap for the gold of the natives. Of course, the islanders have never eaten onion before and when they get to taste this new delicacy they are quite overcome and gladly swap a shipload of onions for a ship full of gold. So the merchant returns home, bragging about his good fortune to anyone and everyone who will listen.

Hearing the bragging of the trader, another wealthy merchant, reasoned to himself, "Ah hah. If the islanders liked onions, then surely they would like garlic even more. So he hired a boat, filled it with garlic and set out for the same distant island. Sure enough, the folk from the island were overjoyed with the discovery of garlic. But when the merchant asked for gold in return they simply said: "Oh no! We could not possibly give you something so mundane and common place as gold for such a wonderful food." They gave him their most prized possession – a ship load of onions – instead.

That's the thing about the abundant life which is God's gift to us in Jesus. It can be hidden under our noses and we may not recognise it. But let me assure you there is nothing bashful and embarrassing about such a life. It is not at all sheepish!

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Quite the contrary! When we take the wisdom of the author of the first epistle of Peter to heart, the abundant life is anything but sheepish. Observing the courage of Jesus on the cross, he reminds us that the abundant life is not necessarily an easy life. It is a life that rises above the challenges of the present moment. When life is tough and those who struggle with its adversity tough it out that is a part of the new life we have in Christ. That is a part of an abundant life. Life we Christ is not all cheese and crackers. Sometimes life with Christ can be decidedly difficult, but that doesn't mean that the abundance has gone AWOL. It just means that the treasure of persistence and perseverance is hidden under our noses and we haven't seen it.

Courage, persistence, perseverance: they are all characteristics of an abundant life.

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But that's not all we can discover about the abundant life from the author of this morning's epistle. The abundant life is a life lived for righteousness. "By his wounds we are healed," he writes. "He bore our sins on the cross so that ... we might live for righteousness."

The abundant life is a life that pursues righteousness. That is, it is a life that carries and communicates ethical meaning and purpose. Our lives carry more meaning and purpose than the wealthy garlic and onion traders of my story a few moments ago can conceive of. It's not all about gold and turning a good profit. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Or should I say values are a matter of perspective. The real treasure of the abundant life is not in gold and material possessions just ask a group of islanders who can tell the true value of onions and garlic.

That word "righteousness" in the scriptures carries a whole cluster of meaning. Partly it is about what God does for us in Jesus. The debt is paid. Justice is satisfied. We are made righteous before God.

But, it is more than that. It is also about what we do for God. Righteousness imagines a world as God wants it. It imagines the new creation where peace and justice reign. (That, by the way, is another aspect to the abundance that Jesus offers.) Righteous lives seek a world as God would want and pursue the values of the new creation. That's where their ethical meaning and purpose come from.

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The abundant life is not at all bashful and embarrassing. There is nothing sheepish about it. It is a courageous life lived in the knowledge of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus and what God wants for God's creation. Standing up for all that is right and just and true is not always easy. Being reconciling, peacemakers in the Spirit of Jesus won't always make you popular.

But we know the Shepherd who calls our name, we follow the Shepherd who call ours name. We know the journey he is on and the abundant life we lead is purposeful and constructive like his. With Jesus we are not like those sneaky thieves and bandits of whom the sheep are rightly afraid. We are creative and fruitful. We carry the gift of life in abundance.

Psalms 23 which we will soon sing is one of the most beautiful psalms. "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want." The Psalmist writes. It goes on to speak of the peace and security and comfort that God gives to those who are God's people. In the dark moments of sorrow and loss, it tells us that God will be with us. Even when enemies get on top of us, it reminds us, God will remain loyal. Surely God's goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, it tells us, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

That is life in abundance. Not always easy, not cowardly and bashful, not at all sheepish (if that's what sheepish means). Instead in Christ it rises above challenges and carries ethical meaning and purpose as it pursues the righteousness of God's community of justice and peace.