

Sermon: Abundant Life Through Jesus

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, April 26, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I recall back oh maybe a decade ago, there was this TV show, produced by NBC, called “The Good Place”. It was sort of a part comedy, part fantasy series, where the main plot centred around an afterlife in which humans are sent after death, to either “the Good Place” or “the Bad place”. All who were recently deceased are given a numerical grade, based on their moral conduct in life. Only those with the highest grades are sent to the Good Place, where they enjoy eternal happiness with their every wish granted; all others would be sent to the Bad Place, presumed to experience an eternity of torture.

With the help of an artificial intelligence name Janet, and under the omnipotent guidance of the architect name Michael, those in the Good Place really had it good—whatever they could imagine a paradise to be, it would be created, individually tailored, with all their whims and wishes fulfilled. Since inhabitants of this Good Place were, in essence, all morally good, perfect even, their wishes and fantasies were mostly kind and benign, that is until someone, a morally corrupt saleswoman name Eleanor was mistakenly let in, and all hell, figuratively and literally, broke loose.

It was a fun show, not particularly Christian, no particular moral leaning, and certainly no hidden message nor lesson to draw from, at least not from my point of view. But it does beget this question: if you could manifest your own good place in the afterlife, what would it look like? How would you describe it?

Certain biblical writers got pretty creative in describing the Good Place, this paradise where they had never been, nor seen, only inspired, could only imagine.

Prophet Isaiah imagine it to be similar to life on earth, only so much better, as “*They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit....my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands...for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well.*” (Isaiah 65:21-23)

The Apostle John describes it as the New Jerusalem, with an urban garden carousing through the city, with *“the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”* (Revelation 22:1-2)

The author of Luke-Acts thought of the earliest Church to be a Good Place, focusing not on the physical attributes, but on mutual sharing and a sense of wonder and awe. *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”* (Acts 2:42-47)

Jesus, perhaps the only person on earth who had actually been to the Good Place, has seen it personally, had come from it, describes it and himself in relation to it, as *“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10)

This phrase of ‘have life and have it abundantly’ comes out of the passage of John 10:1-10, our Scripture reading this morning. The context of this passage is worth examining.

The Gospel of John is organized theologically around seven miracles, structured to reveal the divinity of Jesus. There is one post resurrection miracle, but it kind of stands alone. Each miracle account is followed by description of reaction it generated, and is then followed by a short lesson — a sort of three-act play. John 9-10, as it is presented, follows the same pattern.

As Shannon Michael Pater explains, in *Feasting on the Word*, from a pastoral perspective: “The dramatic action of act 1 (9:1-12) features the miraculous healing by Jesus of one who was born blind....Act 2, complete with separate scenes with and without Jesus, presents a religious controversy prompted by the miracle. The play concludes in act 3, with Jesus acting as a narrator while giving the Good Shepherd discourse (John 10:1–21).”

Shepherd metaphors are prevalent in the Old Testament, or as some call it the Hebrew Scripture. Psalm 23 is the most recognizable, most memorable passage, describing one's personal relationship to the Lord, as *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness, for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."*

David is often portrayed as the ideal shepherd king, given his humble beginning as a real shepherd and his eventual call, eventual vocation as the Lord's anointed, as king.

However, the passage that truly influences John 10 is likely to be Ezekiel 34:1-31, where God is seen as the true shepherd of Israel, where the people are seen as 'sheep' to be led and protected, and where false shepherds, ie. unfaithful leaders, religious or otherwise, are sharply critiqued, as not only failing in their ordained duties, and were causing real harm to the flock. Ezekiel 34 undoubtedly inspired John's portrayal of Jesus as the "good shepherd" who, in contrast to leaders who are "thieves and bandits", bring them protection, guidance and abundant life.

The passage of John 10:1-10 is further broken down into two distinct segments: Verse 1-6 contrasts the true shepherd against thieves and bandits who harm the flock. Presumably the immediately opponents of Jesus, the Pharisees of chapter 9, were the intended recipients of this segment, this 'figure of speech'. When they did not understand what he was saying to them, Jesus went on to the next segment, verse 7-10, where he declares, *"Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep."*

In traditional agrarian societies, an enclosure for the flock would be constructed of stone wall next to a house, and perhaps topped by briars and thorns to discourage unauthorized climbing. When a flock is sufficient large, a hired hand would act as the gatekeeper, along with the gate, preventing anyone coming in to steal the sheep. Thievery was common, and can cause devastating losses, since sheep were valuable sources for food, clothing and bartered income. The purpose of the gate, as Jesus identifies himself to be, was not meant to separate the flock, as if some were more worthy than others, but to keep out thieves and bandits away from the flock.

The gatekeeper recognizes the true shepherd, and opens the gate. The sheep too recognized the true shepherd, and follow his voice. In

contrast to the popular perception of a shepherd following the herd, a shepherd in the Middle East, as one can still see this day, walks out in front of the herd, repeatedly calling out to them, keeping them together by his voice. *“Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them.”* (John 10:7-8)

Throughout this Fourth Gospel, Jesus makes use of the divine name of “I am” to identify his divine identity, while highlighting his connection with deep human longings: *“I am the bread of life”* in chapter 6; *“I am the light of the world”* in chapter 8; *“I am the resurrection and the life”* in chapter 11; *“I am the way, the truth, and the life”* in chapter 14; *“I am the true vine”* in chapter 15. Here in chapter 10, we have the two ‘I am’ statements: *“I am the gate of the sheep”*, and *“I am the good shepherd”*.

It is comforting in knowing that Jesus is both the gate and the shepherd. He is our protector and the access, perhaps the only access to safety and salvation. He leads us ahead with his voice, gently speaking and perhaps singing to the flock.

There may be other voices too, unfortunately, of strangers, thieves and bandits. Be discerning. Don’t listen to them, don’t follow them, for they can only lead you to a bad place.

I am reminded of a story once told by D.L. Moody, the 19th century writer and evangelist: A friend, who was traveling in the East, heard that there was a shepherd who still kept up the custom of calling his sheep by name. He went to the man, and said: "Let me put on your clothes, and take your crook, and I will call them, and see if they will come to me." And so he did, and he called one sheep, "Mina, Mina," but the whole flock ran away from him. Then he said to the shepherd: "Will none of them follow me when I call them?" The shepherd replied: "Yes, sir, some of them will; the sick ones will follow anybody."

How much more important today is to listen to the voice of Jesus, the one and only, true and good shepherd. All who recognize the voice of the true shepherd can follow, will follow, shall follow. For he leads us to green pasture, besides still waters, to a good place, to The Good Place, where we find not only abundant life, but life everlasting.

I don’t know how you would imagine your good place, or describe it to be, but mine is right by the side of Jesus, my good and true shepherd.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**