

Abundant Life: A Snapshot
Acts 2:42–47

Our Scripture readings today like Psalm 23 highlight how God shepherds his people. In John 10 Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. He says that he came so that we might have life, not just metabolism but life in abundance, a meaningful life, a life that will count forever, a life lived in God and for God through faith in Christ.

What does that life look like in practical terms? Our first Scripture reading tells us. Let's look at it once more, Acts 2:42-47.

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

That is a snapshot of abundant life in the early church, just after Christ ascended, just after God's Spirit came at Pentecost. This picture remains an ideal and a goal for churches today, here and around the world. I hope that by reminding ourselves of how the church began, we can see how the church, how this church, may continue under Christ's lordship.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Strange things happen in the name of the church. It's important that churches get on track and stay there. You may have read of this extreme example of going off the track: dozens of people found in mass graves this week in Kenya, members of the Good News International Church.

They died of starvation. Their pastor told them to quit eating so they could be with the Lord before the world ends, which they were told is going to happen soon. An African theologian observes that sometimes “unscrupulous leaders are able to take advantage of [people’s] desire to find a solution to their problems.”¹

Oh but that’s far-away Africa, you say. Some here will remember as I do what happened in 1978. In the so-called “Jonestown Massacre,” more than 900 church members of a church that started in Indiana died in a mass suicide-murder under the direction of a pastor named Jim Jones.² He had led his impressive multiracial congregation to British Guyana. Then he led them to destruction.

These are extreme examples. But at all levels at all times churches struggle to find the sweet spot of fidelity to God’s word and expression of the love of God in Christ that the gospel message calls for and enables.

Our Acts reading reminds us what the abundant life led by our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ looks like. We’ll see three things: devotion, commotion, and promotion.

I. Devotion. V. 42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Don’t think of this first as what people were doing. Think of it was Christ was doing in the people and through the people. Why do I say that?

This is Acts 2. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, had just energized Jesus’ followers. Christ has just ascended into heaven, after being crucified and rising from the dead and appearing to his followers and teaching them over a period of 40 days. Christ told his followers: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea.”

And now they were. Jesus predicted it. Now Jesus was orchestrating it by the presence of his Holy Spirit. He was guiding them like a shepherd guides his flock. But he was doing it by his spiritual presence in each of their hearts. He was also doing it by the teaching he had instilled in followers during his three years with them.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65374093>. Accessed April 24, 2023.

² See, e.g., <https://www.history.com/topics/crime/jonestown>

They *devoted* themselves to that teaching. Here is where we meet a challenge. They embraced devotion: we embrace distraction. What is distraction? Here is a list courtesy in part of the journal *Psychology Today*³:

- Texting while driving;
- Texting during dinner;
- Spacing out (e.g., staring out the classroom window, wool-gathering);
- Playing video games when you should be doing homework;
- Focusing on the wrong thing (e.g., a CEO who micromanages his office redecoration while the company tanks);
- Not being able to read a serious book like the Bible because your attention has been eroded by email and cat videos.

Let me add another one: distractions in the form of addictions like alcohol or weed or porn.

Distraction is basically mind-wandering and perhaps acting out where mind-wandering takes us. We peek at our cell phone rather than paying attention to the teacher or the pastor. We read or type emails while we're on a Zoom link because no one can tell, and we're bored with what we should be paying attention to.

We end up obsessed with things that are unhealthy.

Not all distraction is evil and horrible. But it is possible to be so dominated by distraction that it defines our lives. We move from one app to another, or maybe juggle several apps on multiple devices. It can eat at your soul. The wrong sorts of obsessive distractions can mess you up real bad.

Do we have times and places in our lives when and where we are devoted to God? The early church did. They did what many of you have done a great deal of, over the years when Pastors Breum and Shields led Bible studies: you devoted yourself to what the Scriptures teach. That's a solid foundation many of you have built on.

I pray that devotion will continue to mark the commitment and the culture of St. Mark as you search for our next pastor. Don't be a distracted church; be a devoted church. Make room daily for your own personal Bible reading. Make room frequently for meeting with others to grow and be confirmed in your faith and practice of what God's word says.

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/rest/201602/so-what-is-distraction-again>

Grow in the kind of habitual inner heart and character that communes with Christ, abides in him, seeks him, grows in him, honors him. This is why the gospel message goes forth: to change our lives to make us disciples so we can make disciples of others. That's AD 30 Acts 2 devotion. That's also AD 2023 devotion.

But our Acts reading says more about devotion. The early Christians were led by the Lord Jesus into fellowship, into meals together and what we call holy communion, and to prayer. This is all shorthand for regular Christian meetings in private homes, house churches we call them, since church buildings like this one did not exist. People met from house to house. In many places worldwide they still do.

The Lord Jesus shepherds his people by focusing our hearts on apostolic teaching, on togetherness that encourages us like coffee and donuts in the fellowship hall, on shared meals and holy communion, on both private and public prayer.

But let's move now from 1. Devotion to 2. Commotion. Abundant life in Christ is a focusing and uniting force. At the same time it kicks up dust. Hear again from our Acts reading:

43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

When Christ leads us, things happen. Sometimes they are peaceful and orderly things. But sometimes they are disruptive. In our Acts reading, which describes early Christian life among Jesus-believing Jews in Jerusalem, both orderly and disruptive things took place.

It says "Awe came upon every soul." That's beautiful! That's not disruptive. It's a sense of worship, of God's grandeur, of the power of the gospel message, of gratitude for God's forgiveness, of wonder at his Triune mystery.

But history tells us that in the early years of the Jerusalem church, there was persecution. People lost their jobs because Jesus was regarded as a false prophet by many—that's why he was crucified. If you believed in Jesus, you got canceled. People got kicked out of their families. Jesus predicted it. He said families would be divided as some followed him and others didn't.

That's why we read that people had all things in common. It's not that they formed a commune. It's that some fell on hard times because of the disruption of their lives and their livelihood due to following Christ. Their fidelity to the Lord and to each other caused commotion in the form of social ostracism, unemployment, homelessness.

The words "selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need"—those words can be read romantically: O how nicely they shared!

But here's what was going on, as described in the book of Hebrews chapter 10: early Christians loved each other. They cared and went to bat for the gospel message and for each other. As a result, they "endured a hard struggle with sufferings,"³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.³⁴ [They] had compassion on those in prison, and [they] joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property."

Following Christ caused a commotion. You don't have to be an ancient Christian to have your life disrupted by God's call to help others by giving generously to others in need. Some lives are disrupted by God's call to go to a seminary like where I teach to learn and train for Christian living and ministry. Most of my students live very disrupted lives as they follow God's call and endure many hardships in pursuing graduate study while also working and often doing their share of childcare if they are blessed with kids, as many are.

Christ often causes commotion. You may be involved in a relationship that is not pleasing to God. You may be reminded from Scripture, and God's Spirit may convict you, to make a change. It may be painful. But it may be necessary, because God is holy, and he wants us to reflect his goodness, which some kinds of relationships do not. God's call to put him first can be disruptive of our personal lives.

What's wonderful here is that God's disruption, when we look back, was always for our good as well as for his glory. When I was in 5th grade my life was disrupted by God. I was at the age and stage where back then boys discovered dirty jokes. I was telling one to a group of my classmates on the playground. Just before I got to the punchline, a Christian friend walked up to me. He got in my face, which stopped my joke, thank God. And he said, one 5th grade man to another, his finger in my face: "Yarbrough, this just isn't right in the sight of God."

Ruined my joke! Dinged my popularity! Caused a commotion! I think that ended my career as a potty-mouth standup comedian. We went back to playing tag, which was an improvement.

The Psalmist said, “Create in me a clean heart, O God.” A life free of the smut of dirty jokes and lewd thoughts is a better life, a desirable life, for boys, for girls, for grown women, for men. It’s a step in the direction of an abundant life.

It’s the kind of life Christ calls us to and works in his as we receive his teaching, grow in fellowship and prayer, and learn to yearn for his disruption for the sake of enjoying fellowship with him and serving him and honoring him with our lives and decisions and resources.

Abundant life in Christ brings about 1. devotion, 2. commotion, and finally 3. promotion. Our Acts reading ends like this:

46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

By promotion I mean God elevated their lives. They worshiped together at the Jerusalem temple, which was a daily activity for Jews. For us that would be like attending this worship service. I’m glad I’m here and hope you are too. It’s uplifting.

David said, “I was glad when they said unto me: Let us go into the house of the LORD.” Amen. God elevates our souls, he cleanses us, he instructs us, he calms us, he guides us, he loves us through a steady practice of public worship. I’m so glad you are here. I pray you will love God more and we will love each other more as a result.

By promotion I mean human happiness. Today theologians use the word “flourishing.” They were “breaking bread in their homes” and “they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people.” Does that sound like gloomy religion to you? Does that sound like a guilt trip or self-righteous dead ritual?

Not at all. These people shared in the knowledge of forgiveness of their sins. They had believed in Jesus' death on the cross for their sins. They bought into the news of, some had personally seen, Jesus alive from the dead. By the hundreds and thousands, "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

God promotes his people, and he promotes his Son Jesus Christ through the lives of those who are being saved. It happened then. It is still happening now.

Are you saved? Have you invited Christ into your life personally? Do you know the devotion, the commotion, and the promotion of the living Lord in your life? If not, this is a good day to believe in him, entrust your life to him. I invite you to do that as this service closes. If you do, let's talk after the service. Make my day! Jesus said (Lk 15:10), "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." It's the beginning of the greatest thing that can happen to someone.

For all of us, Christ the Good Shepherd, offers life, a life of abundance. Believe. Be saved. Follow him.

Amen and amen.