

## The Shepherd Politics of Abundant Life Resurrection from a Way of Death

*Spirit of the Living God,  
Come and grow our faith, deepen our hope and strengthen our love.  
Come and water within us the desire to be your faithful family forever. Amen.*

### Brief Two-Week Recap

A word about Easter

- Easter is a season and Resurrection is a journey...an Exodus Journey.
- The Resurrection journey empowers us to return to Jerusalem.
- The Resurrection journey does not get us over the Cross, rather it empowers us to face the Cross with a little more courage and a little less indifference and denial.
- The Resurrection journey involves the shedding of false assumptions that we live by, e.g. reality as separateness rather than interconnectedness; scarcity rather than abundance.
- Awakening to the truth of these false assumptions that we are addicted to this is a source of both terror (dying) and joy (resurrection).

A word about Covid-plague

- The Economics (management of the household) Exploitation (living without limits, without rest/sabbath) effects both people and plant, society and soil.
- Plagues are the world's rebellious response to being abused resulting from exploitation. [See the link between living without limits and plagues: [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/halt-destruction-nature-worse-pandemics-top-scientists?CMP=tw\\_t\\_a-environment\\_b-gdneco](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/halt-destruction-nature-worse-pandemics-top-scientists?CMP=tw_t_a-environment_b-gdneco) ].
- The recurring temptation will be to try and circumvent the consequences of our Economics of Exploitation rather than to address the causes.
- Each time we don't deal with the causes, the next plague will carry more deadly consequences ... until we hit rock bottom. With each denial and delay the 'cure' (Economics of Jubilation) will be more painful to administer.
- What makes changing from an Economics of Exploitation to an Economics of Jubilation so painfully difficult is that we are addicted to the system of exploitation that is killing us, for our survival. Therefore, changing or resurrecting or being saved from the system can feel like we are dying.
- The Economics of Exploitation is dependent on more and more growth. We must increase consumption to survive ... but hang on ... it is over-consumption that is killing us. More *from* less and more *for* less. If the economy is not growing, we are told it will collapse. Thus, we must grow, grow, grow. This is a pretty good definition of a Ponzi scheme. Ponzi schemes are illegal for good reasons, and so should the Economy of Exploitation – because they both leave the majority with nothing.

### Today's texts:

Psalm 23

Ezekiel 34

Acts 2:42-47

John 10:1-11

I love the fact that Jesus was not always understood. It makes me feel a bit better about my sermons that people tell me they don't understand.

In the Gospel reading for today Jesus used a figure of speech about a sheepfold, but we read that the people listening "did not understand what he was saying to them". [John 10:6]. Jesus then explains himself by using another figure of speech that may even be more confusing than his first. It certainly is to me. He declares: "I am the gate. Whoever

enters by me will be saved...". Jesus then tells us his mission in plain language: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". [John 10:10]. And then Jesus self-identifies as the "good shepherd". [John 10:11].

I do not know the reasons why they failed to understand Jesus back in the day, but I guess this text invites us to humbly consider the truth that we don't always understand Jesus either. This is most important to remember when we are most sure of our understanding.

Humility is knowing that we don't know what we don't know.

Humility is questioning our own understandings.

Humility is remaining open to ever new ways of understanding.

To help our understanding of the Good Shepherd Gospel reading as well as the Psalm for today, the most famous Psalm of all – Psalm 23 "The Lord's my shepherd", it is crucial to note that 'shepherd' was a reference to people in power, like the king or prime minister or president. The title 'shepherd' aptly reminded political leaders of their pastoral function.

The serene scenes in children's picture Bibles that still linger in our adult minds, of Jesus walking over lush green hills speckled with happy sheep, tame the text and de-politicise both Gospel and Psalm. The added fact that Psalm 23 is repeatedly returned to during funerals also de-politicises its radical message – as if its sole purpose is to help us deal with the transition of our loved ones into the next-life.

A quick look at Ezekiel 34 will make the point about the political nature of the term shepherd and thereby the political – this life focus – of the Gospel and Psalm for today.

#### **Ezekiel 34**

- There are false shepherds
  - False shepherds live *off* the sheep rather than live *for* the sheep
  - Instead of feeding the sheep, false shepherds feed on the sheep
  - False shepherds steal from the sheep instead of providing for them
  - False shepherds don't heal the sick, or bind up the injured or seek out the lost
  - False shepherds rule with harshness and force that scatter the sheep who become prey
  - False shepherds also "tread down with your feet the rest of the pasture and foul up the waters". In other words, their relationship with the environment is one of wasteful disregard.
- *Yhwh* alone is the Good Shepherd
  - *Yhwh* says: "I am against the false shepherds". In other words, there are people in power who God is against which should be remembered when the powers start quoting Romans 13.
  - *Yhwh* reminds everyone that the sheep do not belong to the false shepherds (like property / slaves).
  - *Yhwh* commits to seek, rescue, feed, bind up the sheep. Strengthening the weak and giving them rest (lie down). They will live in safety and to be nourished with splendid vegetation "never to be consumed with hunger again". This is how *Yhwh* will save the sheep. This is *Yhwh's* vision of salvation. Salvation is giving life to the living. Jesus call this Salvation, Abundant Life.

From this we see that pastoral care is the primary function of politicians and less so priests. The priestly function was to prophetically remind the politicians of their pastoral responsibilities. How this has changed in today's world. We priests are schooled to spend more time helping people transition to the next life (reading Psalm 23) rather than holding those in power accountable to provide the social goods most necessary for abundant life.

From this perspective we begin to see how politically provocative it is to recite: "The Lord is my shepherd", because if the Lord is my shepherd then the powers that be do not have final authority over me and it also reminds the powers that be of their pastoral obligations. From this perspective we also see how subversive Jesus' statement is: "I am the Good Shepherd". It is tantamount to treason, putting Caesar in his place.

Look more closely at Psalm 23 through a political lens and we will see that it is a concise check list for just about every just and merciful political manifesto ever wished for.

When the Lord is my shepherd / king / president

- We will not want for social services.
- We will be given:
  - Sabbath / rest / lie down (no exploitative relationships)
  - Food / nourishment / green pastures
  - Clean uncontaminated water
  - Holistic healthcare / restoration
  - Education / guidance / right paths
  - Protection / comfort / no fear of those in power
  - Mediation / reconciliation with enemies around table
  - Abundance / cup overflows
  - Two words sum up public policy: goodness and mercy
  - Lifelong housing without the possibility of eviction.

Jesus says that he as the Good Shepherd has come to bring abundant life. In the light of the *realpolitik* Ezekiel 34 and Psalm 23, Jesus is talking about Life in this life. Jesus comes to give us life before death. Jesus is committed to healing and transforming this life. Jesus saves us for life this side of death. Abundant life is Jesus' synonym for salvation.

The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the false shepherds and Jesus speaks of the bandits, thieves, and strangers [John 10: 1] who climb into the sheepfold without using the gate, reminding us that there are many in positions of power who live off those they meant to feed. Who prey on those they meant to protect. Sadly, there are too many examples of this in the world today. [See <https://www.amazon.com/How-Steal-City-Mandela-Account/dp/1868428206> for a South African example or [https://www.amazon.com/Hiding-Plain-Sight-Invention-Erosion-ebook/dp/B07QNFCSPH/ref=pd\\_rhf\\_dp\\_p\\_img\\_3?encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=QFZQ0CVW9FPMHVXYBAPH](https://www.amazon.com/Hiding-Plain-Sight-Invention-Erosion-ebook/dp/B07QNFCSPH/ref=pd_rhf_dp_p_img_3?encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=QFZQ0CVW9FPMHVXYBAPH) for a USA example.]

The truth of false shepherds is an important reminder especially to those of us who think that we can't go back to normal after Covid-19. I have seen that said by so many: "We can't go back to normal". Well if it is said as a statement of protest and resistance, because the normal was murderous for society and soil alike, I say amen. But if it is said as a statement of fact, then I say you have got to be kidding me. It denies the true reality of false shepherds. There are false shepherds who are plotting and planning to return to the Exploitative Economy of feeding off the sheep they meant to be living for after Covid-19. In fact, some have already figured out how to benefit from this very Covid-19 crisis, and many of the worst will do it wearing Jesus' name over their lips like a face mask hoping not to be caught out.

Come to think about it, this might have been the reason why Jesus' audience did not understand him back in John 10:6. He was speaking to the religious authorities who had just excluded a blind-but-now-I-see-person from the temple. These religious authorities profited from political patronage of their day – so it was no surprise that they did not want someone in their midst who could truly see them for who they were. It is also no wonder that they did not (want to) understand Jesus. To do so would mean they would have to admit being in bed with bandits and thieves. We are not unlike them. Sometimes we too do not understand because, as Upton Sinclair said: "It is difficult to get a man (sic) to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it." At other times convenience and comfort cauterise our conscience. And sometimes we are so insulated from the consequences that we don't realise we are sitting in a pot of water that is slowly heating up.

Now that we have re-planted the Good Shepherd Gospel text and Psalm 23 in their provocative political soil, we can see their deep Easter significance and how they connect to our reflections over the past two weeks: Easter as Exodus. Exodus as the journey from death to life. From slavery to liberation. From Exploitative Economics to an Economics of Jubilation. From Emmaus back to Jerusalem to face the cruelty of the world and our own capacity to crucify for the sake of the world's and our own transformation.

Last week I said: Resurrection is not about a death-defeating-never-ending-place in the sky for the dearly departed, but rather an invitation for the living to imagine and practice a death-defeating-economy that secures a life sustaining society where we can actually see the sky. Using this week's language or imagery we might say: a-Lord's-my-shepherd economy that secures abundant life for all.

In today's reading from Acts 2 we witness the early disciples practicing a-Lord's-my-shepherd economy that secures abundant life for all in their midst.

With Resurrection Light the early disciples not only had their eyes open to the false shepherds of their time, but also the false values and assumptions they themselves had lived by. This was a terrifying joy [Matthew 28:8]. With Resurrection Light they began to face the crucifying truth that even though they had called Jesus Lord, they had remained followers of Caesar's Empire and were skilled traders within the Exploitation Economy (remember their reaction to Jesus when he told them it was as difficult for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God as it was for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle? See [Mark 10:23-27].) They had been addicted to the empire for their survival but now with Resurrection Light they see it was killing them. And not only do they see it – but they break free from it. They are resurrected from it. They are saved from it. In our reading from the book of Acts today, we witness how the early disciples were resurrected (saved) from a way of death, reminding us that the saved are those who are set free from fear to choose life for all. Listen how they begin to do that:

"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 by 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 they 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 good will of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." [Acts 2:42-47].

The disciples were resurrected from an Economy of Exploitation to an Economy of Jubilation as they began to practice the Sabbath of Jubilee. This is the new life that Jesus' Resurrection resurrected. Jesus' resurrection resurrects the disciples *from* a way of death and *for* a way of life and by doing so gives abundant life to others through them. As we read: "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (saved: not as in creedal declaration but as in experiencing life in abundance and themselves converting from a way of death to a way of life for others to experience abundant life through them).

The practice of Jubilee – an economy of Jubilation resulting from radical debt relief and radical sharing is what the world needs to be saved – is what our country needs to be saved – is what we need to be saved. [See an urgent call for a Jubilee-like policy especially in a Covid-19 South Africa <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-why-south-africa-needs-a-wealth-tax-now-137283> ]

If you are anything like me – it is at this point that you are gripped by a terrifying joy. The joy of the principle wrestles with the terror of the practice within me. With the practice most often claiming victory leaving me with the chilling realisation that I call Jesus Lord and Shepherd, but I remain a pretty faithful follower of Caesar. Hi, my name is Alan and I am addicted to an economy of exploitation.

So, I read again Mark 10:26-27 "The disciples were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

The disciples – seeing with Resurrection Light trusted that for God all things are indeed possible, and this set them free from fear to be saved from their wealth by radically sharing it all who had need. In this we witness their resurrection from a way of death to practice a-Lord's-my-shepherd-economy of the abundant life of all. Amen.