

Why Did Jesus Come?

John 10: 1-10

Why did Jesus come? Why did he walk among us and do what he did? I can tell you in two words: abundant life! But the questions remain: what is it and how do we get it?

We know Jesus taught using parables, stories that have one primary meaning that is best discovered by the listener finding her/himself in the story. In the passage from John's Gospel, Jesus actually used a simple allegory to teach his disciples the right way for Israel to follow. He had finished healing a blind man and criticizing the religious leaders for their blindness. Then Jesus moved into an allegorical sheep story about a flock that was penned up and awaiting their leader, the real shepherd.

“Watch out for those thieves and bandits that climb over the fence instead of entering by the gate!” Jesus was referring to Jewish zealots who advocated violent rebellion against Rome. He warned against that way and challenged the religious leaders to keep watch and guide the people instead of colluding with the Romans. He also warned that those religious leaders were also thieves and robbers. The real shepherd, the good shepherd, enters through the gate and leads the sheep to green pastures and still waters.

The disciples just did not seem to understand Jesus' meaning. He spelled it out more clearly by telling them. “I am the gate, the way. I am the good shepherd who leads the sheep. The way of the zealots, of violent resistance, leads to death and destruction. It does offer hope and life to Israel. The way of the religious establishment, of collusion with the domination system of Rome, does not offer hope or life either.” The way of Jesus leads to life, abundance, and overflowing fullness -- what life ought to be.

Why did Jesus come? Two words: abundant life! Have you ever *Googled* the phrase abundant life? You would not believe the number of *Abundant Life* churches, fellowships, and other gatherings. Abundant life represents a core piece of Jesus' teaching. It is what people most want to find and take in.

There are many words that mean approximately the same thing as abundance. There are also many ways to express this idea of abundant life, but the fundamental question remains, “What was Jesus meaning by abundant life in the Gospel of John?” One answer is that abundant life means success or to have plenty of money, popularity, and power. Abundant life can mean having your needs met and your desires fulfilled. But is that the true meaning? Was that Jesus' meaning as he addressed the disciples?

What is wrong about this idea of abundant life? It sounds really good to have everything you want -- like a fantasy. It would be like winning the lottery or spending the night in a bakery or candy shop. It definitely satisfies your craving for sweets, but leaves other needs unmet. Jesus was talking about meeting people's basic and higher needs, including the need for meaning, acceptance, growth, a sense of self, connection with others, and peace.

Jesus said, “Whoever enters by me will be saved.” He echoes this same idea later in John’s Gospel when he says, “I am the way.” Jesus as *the way* is often understood in terms of salvation and the state of being lost. If you follow Jesus, you’ll be accepted and you won’t be rejected by God! I want to suggest that you can also be lost by losing your way – failing to realize the potential of your life. We can be lost by failing to invest in in becoming what we can be.

This is not to scare you. There is no failure that will place you outside the love and presence of God. This is also not to assign blame for not trying hard enough. Circumstances can combine with fear and lead us to lose sight of the potential God has placed within each of us. It is possible for us to lose a sense of our reason for being. On the other hand, there is so much to gain from investing ourselves, using our gifts, and committing ourselves to the journey.

Jesus was making a point to his ragtag followers who lived under very difficult circumstances. It is also the point the writer of John’s gospel was teaching his readers. The basic survival needs of life for all people are very much connected to the higher needs of acceptance, meaning, love, and fulfillment (abundance).

In our hard charging American culture, the path of abundance encourages us to work hard, achieve more, and take additional responsibility. It is a cycle that keeps escalating. One way to avoid this cycle of doing more is to get creative in *hiding* our potential even from ourselves. We sometimes choose to step back from giving or investing ourselves because of a realistic fear of over-committing, failing, and burning out.

When investing ourselves feels like just working harder and adding more stuff, that is a problem. Our lives get filled up with more demands and more responsibilities. It can feel disheartening and many people are feeling overwhelmed already. So, what to do? What is the key?

I suggest the key is a question: “What is it that brings you to life?” What generates energy, hope, and newness in you? What brings me life and brings life in me is living so that my hope, time, and energy are invested in ways that make me a better person, a growing person accomplishing what I want to accomplish with my life. It is what helps e feel in sync with God’s loving dream for my life. It is what gradually moves me to return a sense of power for my life and my choices back inside me. Perhaps that is true for you as well?

There are definitely times we all need to take a break, disconnect a bit, and even just *veg out*. It’s a good thing to follow the example of our Creator and take a Sabbath rest. This can help us to stay in sync, remain in the flow of the Spirit, and not over function. At the same time, my experience is that we cannot renew ourselves by avoiding investing ourselves. Burnout is not a matter of working too hard, but of feeling responsibility beyond what you have the power to control. This can result in your feeling that you have failed already or at least will inevitably fail.

Renewal and refreshment result from doing what you love in a way that feeds you, that brings life to you, and brings you to life. Sometimes we get bogged down at Crossroads Church in our efforts to govern ourselves and work together as together. We occasionally have lengthy meetings and get stuck in procedures and processing the process. In those cases, the process is not always life giving.

One thing that is life giving in that process is how we let the Spirit move through how we approach being church. As we set our direction, priorities, and organization each year, we do it by seeking the leadership of the Spirit. This process for me is usually life-giving. It motivates me to decide my top priorities and how, through the church, I will give my time, energy, and creativity in the coming year. It is also life-giving to hear from others, benefit from their sense of creativity and calling, and how their interests may connect with mine. At the same time, planning a new year of ministry is a little bit like living a whole year of stresses and responsibilities all at once and in advance!

It can be exhausting to experience all that stress. I have to remind myself to stay in my own skin and do what brings me to life. That means trusting the Spirit to call others along their own paths, according to their own passion, and for their own work. That means trusting the abundance of the Spirit in the life of the church, and in my life.

My son Jonathan serves as president of an organization at the University of Cincinnati called Peace Village. For the third year now, they have sponsored a conference on social justice to help people find ways to get involved helping the poor and homeless people in the city of Cincinnati. Participants also go into the city, needing to find their way on public transportation to service organizations where they would learn about the work going on with the poor. Their experiences produced some measure of frustration and conference leaders try not to be too helpful in this area. There are opportunities to process feelings and what learning comes to them as a result.

The most important learning for those at the conference is to get in touch with the necessary balance between the incredible need out there and finding specifically what you really want to do, what you are passionate about doing in response. Inevitably, those motivated by “should do it” end up either giving up or burning out. The ultimate goal of the conference is to have your response to the need you see become part of your life. For that to happen, what you do needs to bring you life. The abundance piece needs to be built into the work itself.

Years ago, before my wife Kathy and I adopted our daughter, a social worker from the adoption agency told us something very important. The only reason to adopt is that both of us really wanted to be parents. Any other reason, such as rescuing the child, would not stand up to the demands of parenting.

Please hear this. What is most important for you to do in your life will never be identical to what I or somebody else expects you to do. God calls us to discern, imperfectly as we do, what brings us to life and what brings life to others through us. Then, God calls us to embrace that perspective as the lens through which to view everything else in our lives.

That is what Jesus did. To follow him, we need to choose the first thing first and make subsequent choices as the result of that first choice. Author Elizabeth O'Connor expressed this well:

When we succeed in ignoring our wants, they either find expression in destructive ways or cause us all kinds of ills and problems that make us self-centered and self-serving – the very end we are so anxious to avoid. The outcome, however, is not usually this dramatic. Out of touch with the life-giving energy of our wants and desires, we are more apt to become flat and uninteresting people. Imperceptibly disintegration goes on at the very core of life. The calm and expressionless face reflects not peace at the center, but a dying going on within.

Though we may have only a tiny spark or smoldering wick within us, our task is to fan it into fire. (Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

Jesus' resurrection is at the heart of Christian faith. The reality of the resurrection for our lives is in how we answer the question, "Do you want to live?" I invite you to join the response of Crossroads church to the question, "Why did Jesus come?" Affirm with all of us that Jesus came that we, you and I, might have life and have it abundantly.

John 10: 1-10 (NRSV)

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

John 10: 1-10 (The Message)

1-5 "Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it."

6-10 Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.