

“I came,” said Jesus, “that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” What is abundant life? Where can you get it? Who has it? Maybe the newly named host of *Are You Smarter than a Celebrity*—the three-time Super Bowl Champ who is dating Time Magazine’s 2023 person of the year” Or maybe the person of the year herself, who got a 14th Grammy award in 2024 and made Forbes’ Billionaire’s list three weeks ago? Maybe the national player of the year in women’s college basketball this year (and last)—and likely to be the first overall pick in the 2024 WNBA draft? Travis Kelce? Taylor Swift? Caitlyn Clark? Do they have abundant life? If not them, then what about the Finns, citizens of Finland, who have just been found to be “the happiest people in the world” for seven years running? Who has abundant life? The person, who “has it all”: fame—and popularity—and talent—and riches? Beauty and fitness and intelligence and education? Is abundant life about living “happily ever after,” like a character in a fairy tale?

Hardly. When I think of Jesus’ abundant life, I think of Sylvia, a member of my internship congregation in Los Angeles. Sylvia, who was born in Belize, which you might know as British Honduras, and seldom had enough to eat as a child. Sylvia, who spent three days a week going to dialysis, and the rest of the week recovering. Sylvia, who worried every day about her grandson in jail. Sylvia, whom I can still hear saying in her Caribbean accent, even when she didn’t feel well: “Pastor, we just have to praise the Lord.” Sylvia had life—and had it abundantly.

And I think of Mildred, my Toledo neighbor, a survivor of breast cancer. Mildred, who lived with the challenges that come with life-long poverty and decreasing mobility and declining health. Mildred, who practiced gratitude, every single day, a “prayer warrior” who taught me to pray as St. Paul admonishes us in Philippians 4: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Mildred, who “prayed with thanksgiving,” trusting that God would provide for her. Like Sylvia, Mildred had life, and had it abundantly.

I think also of Professor Sasaki, retired from teaching at the Lutheran boys’ high school where I taught English in Japan. Professor Sasaki, who met Jesus at a missionary’s English Bible Study—and loved him all the rest of her life, who made her way as the only woman on the faculty at the boys’ high school for the forty years she taught there. Professor Sasaki, who lived with rheumatoid arthritis, which crippled her hands and feet, who reminded me to be grateful for the gift of every single day. Like Sylvia and Mildred, Professor Sasaki had life, and had it abundantly.

Do you have life, abundantly? “Abundant” means “existing or available in large quantities; more than enough; plentiful, copious, profuse.” What does it mean to have life “existing or available in large quantities”? To have “more than enough” life? To have life that is plentiful or copious or profuse?

Is the abundant life that Jesus offers us “more than enough”? Does abundant life mean that you have “more than enough” money to buy the house you want and the car you crave and the vacation you long for? Does it mean health in large quantities, so much health that you don’t ever experience illness or injury? Does it mean driving as fast as you wish or drinking as much as you want, with no concern about the consequences of your actions upon yourself or others?

No, my friends. Abundant life does not mean having more than enough money or more than enough stuff or radiant health or a perfect family or actions without consequences. It’s not about “making it” or “having it all.” It’s not about having a dream job or a dream house or a dream partner. It’s not about having everything that you want whenever you want it.

What, then, is this “abundant life” of which Jesus speaks, of which he tells those who follow him, “I have come that you might have it”? Certainly, sometimes, some among us have more than enough money or health or a dream job or a happy family, but most of us, most of the time, don’t, at least not more than one of those blessings at a time. We struggle financially, or we experience chronic pain, or we bear the scars of childhood abuse or neglect or parental pressure to perform, or we have to work extra hard to build an intimate partnership. We dream about “having it all” or “getting it together,” but most of the time we have almost none of it, and we can’t keep what little we do have together.

And, yet, Jesus comes to us, to you, to me, and he says, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.” He comes to the single mother working two jobs to keep her housing, to the CEO reporting to the doctor’s office for a biopsy, to the father who has lost his wife and children because of his drinking, to the young woman who is beginning to uncover her denial of childhood abuse. Jesus comes to each of these—and to you and to me, and he says, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly. I have come to you, right where you are, in the midst of your illness, your addiction, your depression, your brokenness, your debt, your fear. I have come, not to take these challenges away, but to walk with you as you learn to carry them—or as you learn to let them go. I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”

Jesus’ desire for you is that you have life—and have it abundantly—more than enough, available in large quantities, plentiful, copious, profuse. But his concept of abundant life doesn’t match our American capitalistic mindset; I don’t think Jesus really cares if you want a flat screen tv or a marble countertop or a new sailboat, a sports car or a swimming pool or a vacation at Hilton Head. Abundant life, for Jesus, is not defined by lots of stuff or good health or a great education or an extravagant wedding; for Jesus, abundant life is as much for those who have none of those things as for those who have them all. Jesus’ desire for abundant life is for the family who owns a mega-mansion in Montgomery—and for the family who pays 60% of its monthly income for rent in Newburgh. It’s for the teacher who builds a career at West Point—and the laid-off worker who picks up soda cans on Broadway to eke out a living. It’s for the high school senior who runs three miles a day—and the man in a nursing home confined to a wheelchair after running marathons his whole life.

Jesus desires life—abundant life—for each of these, and for you and for me. He describes this life using the metaphor of a sheepfold, with three characters: a shepherd, his sheep, and a hired hand. Jesus imagines abundant life as what a good shepherd provides for the sheep. A good shepherd, he explains, knows her own sheep. She gathers them safely into the fold. When necessary, she lays down her life for them. Unlike the hired hand, who works only to get paid, a good shepherd cares for her own sheep out of love. She stays with the sheep, she holds them when they are in danger or injured, she gathers them to herself. That’s exactly what Jesus does for us: he stays with us, holds us, gathers us, and cares for us.

This Good Shepherd snapshot of abundant life is not a picture of health or wealth or meaningful work or a loving family, though these blessings may certainly accompany it. Instead, the substance of abundant life is about relationship. While the hired hand, not caring for the sheep, scatters them, leaves them, and runs away, the good shepherd remains in relationship with the sheep, knowing them, staying with them, bringing them safely into the fold, even “laying down her life” for them.

Abundant life never depends upon the circumstances of our lives. Jesus himself experienced abundant life even in the midst of suffering and crucifixion and death. He lived in relationship with God and with God’s people, sometimes homeless, sometimes hungry, sometimes lonely, sometimes rejected. Even when things weren’t going his way, Jesus experienced abundant life.

The writer of today’s Psalm, the 23rd, also experienced abundant life, writing, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,” even in the midst of difficulties. This is good news, dear friends. If the Lord is your shepherd, you shall not want, ever, no matter what circumstances life hands you. If the Lord is your shepherd, you shall not want, because God will provide for you, even if you lose everything. If the Lord is your shepherd, you shall have life, and have it abundantly. Even if things don’t go well for you, even if your life-plan doesn’t work out, even if you lose your home in a flood or a fire or a tornado, even if you lose your job, even if you lose your spouse, if the Lord is your shepherd, you shall not want; you shall have life. Even if you walk through the darkest valley, even the valley of the shadow of death, you shall have life, life overflowing, life filled with goodness and mercy, abundant life. Because the Lord, the Good Shepherd, is faithful; because the Lord, the Good Shepherd, doesn’t leave you alone; because the Lord, the Good Shepherd, is with you—and remains in relationship with you, no matter what. The Lord, your shepherd, your Good Shepherd, blesses you so that you may have life, and life abundantly.

Jesus’ offer of abundant life does not mean that you—or I—or Travis Kelce or Taylor Swift or Caitlyn Clark—will ever “have it all.” But his offer is even better than a promise that you will live “happily ever after.” Jesus’ offer of abundant life is an assurance that, no matter what you have or don’t have, no matter what happens to you—or what you do or neglect to do, no matter what circumstances life hands to you, he is in relationship with you. He is with you. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who knows you, inside and out, provides for you—just what you need, and in just the right moment. He protects you. He comforts you. He holds you, gently, as a shepherd holds a beloved sheep in her arms. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is in relationship with you, now and always, and he stays with you so that you may have life, and have it abundantly, now and forever. AMEN