

## **From Death into Life**

John 10:11-18

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A number of years ago, I was listening to a radio program while I was driving – and they were talking about a fascinating gizmo. Apparently, there is a device (only heard about it just this once, so not sure how real this is) – a certain kind of voice amplification public address system that pilots can take up with them in airplanes and use to speak from the airplane to a vast amount of ground space below. And so, a voice can come, so to speak, from the heavens – loud enough so that you can hear it on the ground. And I imagined how, if I were a mother, and my child had gone missing – how I would want to get up in an airplane and get on that PA system and fly around calling out, “Zoe! I love you. Mommy’s looking for you.” And I also imagined how comforting that would be to hear – if I were lost – to hear the voice of someone who loved me calling out from the heavens – “Heidi! I love you! I’m looking for you. You’re going to be okay.”

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could hear God’s voice calling to us from the heavens? Telling us where we need to go? Telling us everything was going to be okay? Telling us what we needed to do next? This morning we’re listening for the voice of the good Shepherd – and we’re listening carefully the voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that we often drown out when we listen to the other voices that are trying to get our attention – the robbers. The thieves. The strangers. The wolves. The hired hands.

It’s clear from John 10 that Jesus has a very strong opinion of the religious leaders of his day. They may have been dutifully celebrating Hannukah – the festival of dedication – celebrating the good leaders and shepherds of Israel and lamenting the shepherds that had failed to lead the people well. Jesus is telling them with this parable that the Pharisees, the teachers of the law – *they* are the failed leaders. They are the hired hands who care nothing for the sheep and abandon the sheep when danger comes. They are the wolves that attack and scatter the sheep. They are the thieves and robbers and strangers. They are the voices that are leading astray. In chapter 8 he called them ‘children of the devil’ (v. 44).

Where are the wolves of today? Who are the hired hands that seem to have our best interests in mind, but flee at the first sign of danger because they have no true care for us? Each of us have different voices competing for our attention – herding us toward all sorts of variations of the ‘good life’ – herding us into the folds of our selfish wants –herding us into the folds of our fears.

A lot of those voices come to us through television – and the commercials (interesting how few commercials I see anymore not watching TV, but through ads on facebook and product placement, we still get convinced to buy products.) I remember watching TV with my sister once and an advertisement came on for the Snuggie (a blanket with arms). My sister was making fun of the Snuggie and I thought to myself, huh – a blanket with arms – what a fantastic idea! So, what did Tim get me for my birthday? A Snuggie



I originally delivered this sermon nearly 10 years ago, and it’s amazing how social media has really become the force that draws, the voice that calls. It’s less now that the products draw us, but we, now, become the stars of our own commercials, advertising our selves, our brand... and we find our value in how much of a following we can draw. The voice that threatens to drown out the voice of the Good Shepherd is ... perhaps... our own voice.

Who owns you? Whose sheep fold do you belong to? As we know from John, and from the practice of shepherding today, sheep follow the voice that they recognize. In fact, shepherds had particular calls and even particular tunes that they would play on their lutes in order to herd their sheep into the fold. Sheep don’t follow the voice of the stranger; they follow the voice of the shepherd that they recognize. So, who owns you... Whose voice do you recognize? If a certain political party owns you and is your shepherd, you’re going to recognize

its voice and follow wherever it leads. If an exercise or nutrition movement or regimen owns you, you're going to recognize its voice and follow wherever it leads. If a particular Scripture interpreter owns you, you're going to recognize its voice and follow wherever it leads... If your own voice owns you, you're going to have a hard time recognizing any voices other than your own and you will follow... yourself.

Who owns you? There are many different shepherds who would like to own you, who would like to tuck you away into their fold. It is my prayer that the voice that you recognize – the voice that rings most clearly in your ears, is the voice of the good Shepherd. Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” Yes, Jesus loves you, but Jesus also knows you. Jesus *knows* me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. You are not your own, but you belong – you are owned – and you are known – body and soul – in life and in death – to your faithful Savior and Shepherd Jesus Christ.

Our God, in Jesus Christ, knows us intimately – knows every detail of who we are, and he leads us through rich pastures, alongside still waters, and he is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death. This truth about God is truth from Scripture, of course – but this truth is also central to the tenets of Calvinism. I mentioned this in my sermon 10 years ago because at that time, Calvinism had just been named by Time Magazine as one of the top 10 ideas that are changing the world. The journalist wrote about Calvinism - that “it offers a rock-steady deity who orchestrates absolutely everything ... by a logic we may not understand but don't have to second-guess” (3/23/09 issue of Time).<sup>1</sup>

What was fascinating to me, though, as I was reading the rest of this article was #5 on the list of ideas that are changing the world: amortality. The journalist here says, “you may not have heard of amortality before – mainly because I've just coined the term... Amortals” he says, “live among us. In their teens and 20s, they may seem preternaturally experienced. In later life, they often look young and dress younger. They have kids early or late – sometimes very late – or not at all. Their emotional lives are as chaotic as their financial planning. The defining characteristic of amortality *is to live in the same way, at the same pitch, doing and consuming much the same things, from late teens right up until death*” (same issue of Time). “Amortals

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<sup>1</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20090323,00.html>

don't just dread extinction. They deny it." Through botox and Viagra and therapy and shopping – they deny their mortality and refuse to age.

Isn't it ironic that very same list of world-changing ideas includes Calvinism which holds to the biblical truth that we are not in control, but are completely dependent on God – and amortality which holds to the lie that we *are* in control, independent, not only of God, but of the natural course of aging?

There is even a foundation that exists that lends its scientific endeavors to the fast paced desires of the amortals: the Methuselah Foundation (Methuselah, of course, being the oldest man in Scripture = 969 years old).<sup>2</sup>



In their mission statement they say, "*Aging is a thief* that robs us of our most precious resource – the wisdom and experience embodied in every human life... The ultimate goal of the Foundation is nothing less than the defeat of age-related disease and suffering." In fact, they have a prize that they give to each successive research team that breaks the record for the life span of a mouse. At the end of their mission statement, they say, "Join us in becoming part of the solution to the problem of aging!"

Is this the fountain of youth? Is this what Jesus meant in John 10:10 when he said that he came so that we may have life and have it to the full? Is this what Jesus meant when he said to Martha, "whoever lives and believes in me will never die"? I don't think so. Our good Shepherd knows that true life can only come through submitting to death. "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Later in John, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. <sup>25</sup>The man who loves his life will lose it,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mfoundation.org/>

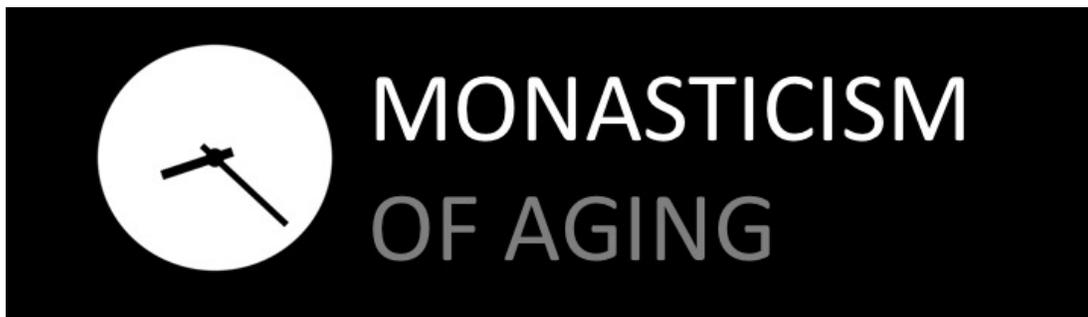
while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24-25). The way to life, is through death – through Jesus’ death on the cross (as he laid down his life for his sheep), and through our own submission to death, through our dying with Christ by laying down our lives for other people.

We prayed this morning, “Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants (for fame, for mortality, etc.). Shepherd me, O God, beyond my fears (of death, of abandonment, etc.) – from death into life.” (Song by Marty Haugen, 1986).

Our reception of life comes only through our joining with Christ in his death. And the more we age, the older we get, the more opportunity we have to really let Christ shepherd us from death into life.

Death became more real to the hockey community in this last week and a half – and perhaps to all of us – as we grieved the sudden deaths of half of that hockey bus in Saskatchewan. People are dying all the time and in all sorts of ways, but when people who share so many similarities to us die in a way that could have easily happened to many of us, we confront our mortality in a sobering way. We will all die – whether tragically or peacefully... whether in an instant or over a long period of time... young, or, hopefully for many of us, old..

My father-in-law, Phil De Jonge calls it the monasticism of aging.



He’s done a long study on the spirituality of aging. As I spoke to him about this once, he put it this way: monastics – men and women who have chosen to live life in monasteries and convents – give up certain things – like their families and their possessions - in order to devote their attention purely to their relationship to God.

Aging, my father-in-law suggests, is kind of like entering a monastery or a convent. Aging strips things away from us– our health, our riches, our family and friends. And as we age, a simplification of life inevitably takes place. We may not like it, but it does – and we are left

with fewer and fewer things – fewer and fewer voices to drown out the voice of our Good Shepherd. Now, we might fight this – like the ammortals, or we might do as Dad suggests: accept our aging and harvest the plantings of our life as we near our death.

When I grow up, I want to be an monastic ager... Or, rather, I want to be a monastic ager now... All of us – no matter if the end is near or not – are invited into the task of confronting our mortality, laying down our desperate wants and fears, and listening to the voice of our Shepherd – following our Shepherd who owns us and knows us and has laid down his life for us his sheep.

Amen.

All Gracious God, You have given me all I am and have,  
and now I give it back to You to stand under Your will alone.  
In a special way I give You these later years of my life.

I am one of those called by You into old age, a call not given to all,  
not given to Jesus, not given to most in our world today.  
I humbly ask You, grace me deeply in each aspect of that struggle.

As my physical eyesight weakens,  
may the eyes of my faith strengthen,  
that I may see You and Your Love in everything.  
As my hearing fails,  
may the ears of my heart be more attentive  
to the whisper of Your gentle voice.  
As my legs weaken and walking becomes more difficult,  
may I walk more truly in Your paths,  
knowing all the while that I am held in the embrace of Your love.  
As my mind becomes less alert and memory fades  
may I remain peaceful in You,  
aware that with You there is no need for thought or word.  
You ask simply that I be there, with You.

And should sickness overtake me and I be confined to bed,

may I know myself as one with Your Son  
as he offers his life for the salvation of the world.

Finally, as my heart slows a little after the work of the years,  
may it expand in love for You and all people.  
May it rest secure and grateful in Your loving Heart  
until I am lost in You,  
completely and forever.

Amen.

Sr. Moya Hanlen - Australia