

“Sheep Know Their Shepherd”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from John 10:22-30

Hear the words from the Jesus’ beloved disciple, John:

Read John 10:22-30

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Most loving God, please stir that part of our brain where hopes are restored and visions created, that we may have a faith that is open to wherever you wish to take us. In the name of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd of our lucky flock.

Amen!

Intro:

It’s a late December day in Jerusalem. Jesus is walking in the portico (entrance) of Solomon, an old and revered part of the Temple, and as usual, he's drawing a crowd. This time, the people gathered around him have come to celebrate the Feast of the Dedication (better known to us as Hanukkah), a festival honoring the rededication of the Temple after its defilement by the Syrian Greeks in 164 BCE.

The people have come with a question. Perhaps they’ve heard one of Jesus’s puzzling parables, or witnessed one of his miracles. Or maybe they just want to trap him into saying something they consider blasphemous. Whatever the motive, the question they pose is a zinger: “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

As I consider this question from our Gospel reading this week, I have two reactions. On the one hand, it feels odd to ask for clarity so soon after Easter. Didn’t we just celebrate the plainest, clearest, most irrefutable proof that Jesus is the Messiah? How can we still be “in suspense” after the Resurrection?

Yet on the other hand, the question, and its timing in our lectionary, feel spot-on. It tells us the truth about how faith works, if we’re honest enough to admit it. Most of the time, faith

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isn't a clear climb from confusion to clarity, doubt to trust. It's a continuous turning. A circle we trace from knowing to unknowing, from unbelief to belief. From “Christ is Risen,” to “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” I used to consider this sort of circling a sin or a weakness, but I don't anymore. It's what we human beings do. It's real life. So, if you find yourself asking Jesus to “speak plainly” into the circumstances of your life on this fourth Sunday of Easter, then you're not alone. If something in you feels suspended, taut, impatient for Jesus to rise again one more time into the particulars of your comings and goings, your nights and days — then welcome to the way of authentic faith. This is how it works.

I don't know about you, but for me, the question Jesus confronts in the temple hits a nerve, and exposes all kinds of pain and yearning. These days, I do feel as if God is keeping me in suspense, and wounding me with his silence. I can't count the number of times in the past few weeks I've started a prayer with the words of the people who approached him on that long ago December day: "If you are." If you are good. If you are powerful. If you are loving. If you are real. If you are the Messiah, then stop talking in riddles. Stop hiding when I long for your presence. Stop awakening in me holy hungers you won't satisfy. Show up, speak plainly, act decisively. Take this world of swirling, doubtful gray, and turn it black and white, once and for all.

But how does Jesus respond? Well as we just read and as we know ourselves when God speaks to us... not plainly. And at first glance not kindly, "I have told you, and you do not believe," he says with a discernible impatience in his voice. And then the icy clincher: "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."

Ouch.

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I'll admit it: I've spent several days now wrestling with the harshness of that sentence. "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." What can such a stark, cut-and-dry pronouncement mean?

I suppose the easy dodge would be to assume that the sentence doesn't apply to me. After all, I'm a “cradle believer”. I grew up in the church. I know my Bible. I love the liturgy, I love the worship, and I say my prayers. Surely I both believe and belong.

Except when I don't. The nagging trouble with Jesus's comment is that it does apply to my spiritual experience. Not rarely, but often. When I ask Jesus to stop keeping me in suspense, when I insist that he speak plainly, what I'm really saying is: "I can't trust you. I trust neither your willingness to speak to me, nor my capacity to hear your voice. You're supposed to be my Good Shepherd. I'm supposed to know your voice, [pause] but I very often don't. **So what now?"**

At first glance, Jesus's reply might appear to suggest that belonging to him depends on believing in him. But in fact, what Jesus says is exactly the opposite: **you struggle to believe because you don't consent to belong.**

In other words, belief doesn't come first.

It can't come first. Belonging does.

And therein lies our hope and our comfort. According to this text, whatever belief I arrive at in this life will not come from the ups and downs of my own emotional life. It will not come from a creed, a doctrine, or a cleverly worded sermon. Rather it will come from the daily, hourly business of belonging to Jesus's flock — of walking in the footsteps of the Shepherd, living in the company of fellow sheep, and listening in real time for the voice of the one whose classroom is rocky hills, hidden pastures, and deeply shadowed valleys. If I won't follow him into those

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layered places — places of both tranquility and treachery, trust and doubt — I will never belong to him at all.

I wonder if Jesus resisted the crowd's question that day because it was so pitifully inadequate. What good would it have done if he'd stood up in the temple at their insistence and yelled, "Yes! Yes, in fact, I am the Christ!" Would anything have changed? Suddenly, would his parables, his countercultural teachings, and his strange miracles have come together into a neat package his listeners could tuck under their arms and carry home? I doubt it. Jesus was a storytelling rabbi — far more interested in spiritual formation than in spiritual formula.

Maybe, by refusing to "speak plainly," Jesus was honoring human life for the incredibly complicated thing it is. After all, one doesn't "speak plainly" about the greatest mysteries of the universe. Jesus came to teach us about truth, about love, and about eternal life. One doesn't simply profess belief in such weighty and mysterious things— one lives into them, questions into them, believes into them, grows into them. One wrestles — and even in the wrestling, **belongs**.

Living as we do on this side of the Resurrection, we know that even the greatest miracle in human history was not enough to stop Jesus's followers from asking searing questions. Even the first eyewitnesses to the empty tomb struggled to believe. Why should we — their heirs — be superior in any way? We are a wondering species, a wandering species, a species prone to stumbling all over ourselves. I'm reminded of the words from 18th cent. Hymnist and pastor, Robert Robinson's hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing":

O to grace how great a debtor

Daily I'm constrained to be!

Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, (like chains)

Bind my wandering heart to Thee.

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Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,

Prone to leave the God I love;

Here's my heart, O take and seal it,

Seal it for Thy courts above.

Bottom line is we are sheep, and our only hope is in the goodness of our ever-loving Shepherd.

I suspect, however, that Jesus's answer was not what the people in the temple that day wanted to hear. They wanted to believe from the outside. They wanted a version of proof that would not require them to step into the smelly sheep pen and muck around with the other sheep. They wanted certainty without risk. Truth without trust. A Messiah who would provide but not provoke. That kind of “plain telling,” Jesus said, is not available. The only knowing that is given is an incarnational (word made flesh) knowing. A knowing that happens within and among the fold. **Why?** Because the belief Jesus is interested in has little to do with our understandings. Or, rather it exceeds our understandings. To “believe” in the Gospel sense means to trust, to lean, to depend, to throw my lot in with. It's an orientation of the heart and the gut. A willingness to stake everything I've got on the person, the character, the life, the death, and the resurrection of God's Son. It's not abstract. It's learned and earned through relationship.

In a beautiful sermon entitled, “Message in the Stars,” Frederick Buechner makes the point this way: “It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want, but the experience of God's presence. That is the miracle that we are really after. And that is also, I think, the miracle that we really get.” In other words, what we really want isn't to see a burning bush speak to us, or to see and hold Jesus's hands where the nails went through, but what we really want is to feel, to experience God's presence. And we who are truly His know we have that experience.

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Sheep know their shepherd because they are his; they walk, graze, feed and sleep in his shadow, beneath his rod and staff, within constant earshot of his voice. They believe because they have surrendered to his care, his authority, his leadership, and his guidance. There is no belonging from the outside; Christianity is not a spectator sport. **Belong**, Jesus says. **Consent** to belong. **Belief will follow.**¹

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, even though we crucified you, you rose from the dead and returned to us to resume the conversation. Even though we forsook you and denied you, you continued to speak to us. We gather here this morning, in church, as your disciples, because we have been convened. You sought us out as a shepherd seeks his lost sheep. You called us by our very own names, you summoned us to follow you as sheep follow their good shepherd. And that’s why we speak to you – because you have spoken to us. Give us open, expectant hearts. Open our ears to what you have to say to each of us. Enable us to hear your special word to each of us. And in hearing your word, you grant us the grace to respond to your word when we leave church and walk into the world. Amen.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/index.php>

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Prayers of the People

God of boundless energy and unqualified love, help us and all people to enter into the joy of your purposes, not limiting our expectations to past failures but opening up to the optimism of eternal life.

We pray for your blessing on those who are physically or mentally handicapped, yet who live a full and creative life.

We pray for the salvation of those who appear sound in body and mind yet are handicapped by a selfish, cramped, and boring outlook.

We pray your blessing on those who extend the boundaries of love, forgiving and liberating those who sin against them.

We pray for the salvation of those who lose the zest for life under the sour influence of anger, jealousy, resentment and bitterness.

We pray your blessing on those who know Christ as a profound happiness to be shared by deed and word through all the common scenes of life.

We pray for the salvation of those who have fallen into pious exclusiveness, becoming self righteous and judgmental.

We pray your blessing on those who in grave illness still believe in providence, and through deep sorrow continue to believe in life.

We pray for the salvation of those who, when ill or injured are in fear, and when in sorrow, are in despair.

We pray your blessing on those who on those politicians who, when in government, sincerely pray to be led by your Spirit of truth.

We pray for the salvation of those who, wanting to rule others, sell their souls for power and prestige and grow shameless in hiding the truth.

We pray your blessing on devoted Christians around us in this congregation for whom abundant life has long been a reality .

We pray for the salvation of those who for reasons they cannot understand, are haunted by doubts and anxieties that inhibit the life of faith.

To you, precious Source of eternal life, to your gracious wisdom we bring these meagre but sincere prayers.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen !