

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Who's Your Shepherd?

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

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John 10:22-30 (NIV)

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. ²⁴ The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

It's the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Today the gospel reading is always some part of the tenth chapter of John's gospel, where Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." When Jesus says, "I am," he is consciously referring to the way God referred to himself when Moses encountered him in the burning bush in the third chapter of Exodus: "I am." Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the vine," and earlier in chapter ten, "I am the Good Shepherd." This metaphor of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is a very familiar one.

But John includes a detail in this morning's passage that gives Jesus' title for himself a very different meaning for us than the picture of a kind shepherd in the pasture surrounded with woolly lambs. John tells us, "**Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade.**" "The Feast of Dedication"

is Hanukkah. Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of God's temple in 164 B.C. The Jewish leaders, the family of Maccabee, had led a bloody revolution against the invading Seleucid Empire, who had trashed and desecrated the temple. The Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, had done everything he could to ruthlessly eradicate Jewish religious life and practices and replace them with Greek paganism. There were many Jews who were ready to throw off the old traditions and adopt Greek ways, which to them were modern and progressive and in keeping with the cultural trends of the great Gentile powers.

But even they must have been appalled at what Antiochus did. He banned all daily and yearly sacrifices in the temple and any observance of the Sabbath. He destroyed all the copies of the Law and the prophets he could find. He executed mothers who dared to have their baby sons circumcised, along with the infants and whoever had performed the circumcision. He put up pagan altars in the towns around Jerusalem. In the temple itself he built an altar to Zeus on top of the Jewish altar of burnt offering. On the twenty-fifth of each month, he had sacrifices made on this altar—the twenty-fifth was the commemoration of Antiochus' birthday. Anyone who departed from his new religious program was put to death.

Antiochus was the first ancient king to call himself a god. His coins read "ANTIOCHUS, GOD MANIFEST, BEARER OF VICTORY"—"Epiphanes", the name he chose for himself, means "manifest". Were he living today, we would say he had high self-esteem. Like many people with high self-esteem, he really didn't care what other people thought—about him or anything else. He was known for his wild and erratic behavior in public and in private, not to mention his barbaric and oppressive cruelty as a king. Behind his back, contemporaries called him "Epimanes" instead of "Epiphanes"—*manes* comes from the same word as our "mania". Antiochus was known as "the crazy one".

Contrast him with the biblical picture of the king as the shepherd of his people. David, Jesus' ancestor, is the picture of the good king. David wasn't perfect, of course, but he wasn't noted for his high self-esteem. He was humble and modest enough to know when he'd done wrong and take responsibility for it. At one point, when things were going well for Israel, he started to bask in his success and wonder just how big the population was. So he did a census, against the advice of his counselors. He sent people out to count the number of people in his kingdom. He allowed himself to slip into the idea that God's people were really his people, and that their peace and prosperity was the result of his own brilliance instead of God's grace and blessing. As a result of his sin, God sent a plague on Israel for three days. In 2 Samuel 24:17 we're told, **"When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, 'I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have**

they done? Let your hand fall upon me and my family.” David understood he had sinned in his pride. But he also understood that his calling as king was to serve his people, to sacrifice himself and his family rather than allow his people to suffer because of his sin. God directed him to buy a threshing floor from Araunah the Jebusite and to offer sacrifice there. When David obeyed, the plague stopped.

Now we fast forward a thousand years to Jesus walking in Solomon’s Colonnade in the temple in Jerusalem. The ancient name of Jerusalem was Jebus, the home of the Jebusites. The temple was built on the site of that threshing floor David, the shepherd of Israel, had bought from Araunah the Jebusite. And it’s the Feast of Dedication, a sober reminder of the temptations to depart from the true worship of the one true God, and a remembrance of Israel’s rededication to worshipping him in this great victory over Antiochus 200 years or so earlier.

In the first part of John chapter ten, Jesus has called himself “the Good Shepherd”. He means he’s a king. People clearly understood that’s what he meant. You’ll recall that one of the accusations at his trial was that he was claiming to be a king and therefore threatening the power of Caesar. It was the charge for which Pilate had him crucified, and which was written on a sign over his head on the cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”.

Yet in our gospel this morning, people are challenging him to openly state that he is the Messiah, “**the Christ**”, which means “the anointed one”, the king. Jesus answers that he has already told them: “**The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me.**” In the previous chapter, he had created a heated conflict with the religious authorities by giving back the sight of a man who was born blind. His works speak for themselves, but these people don’t “hear” them.

Jesus tells these people the reason they don’t hear what he’s saying in these miracles: they’re not his sheep. “**27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all ; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.**” But then he ends with a statement that provokes them to act in a way that proves what he’s saying about them. Our reading ends with verse 30. Listen to verses 31-33: “**Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, 32 but Jesus said to them, ‘I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?’ 33 ‘We are not stoning you for any of these,**” replied the Jews, “**but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.’”**

The people questioning Jesus that Hanukkah thought they were defending the sacred temple from blasphemous desecration. Jesus reminded them of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. They think he's another insane pretender who thinks he's not only a king, but that he's God himself. What they don't realize is that they don't recognize Jesus as the Christ because they've got their own kind of high self-esteem. They're confident of their traditions and their history. They're ready to sniff out anything that smells of heresy or threatens what they hold so dear. The very way of life Antiochus tried so hard to stamp out has become a source of pride and confidence for them. They don't recognize the Good Shepherd because they're too proud to be sheep.

Sheep are helpless in the wild without a human being. They rely on their shepherd for food, to direct them to good pastures, and to protect them from danger. But these folks are relying on their hard-fought traditions and national way of life instead of God himself.

So my question to us all this morning is "Who's your shepherd?" There are myriads of them available: religious authorities, financial authorities, authorities on health and well-being, political authorities, educational authorities, child-raising authorities, the list goes on. Of course, as Christians, we've got our own authorities—the Scriptures and the doctrines of historic Christianity.

But if we're not careful, we can make them every bit the shepherds that Jesus' antagonists had made their life and traditions. Jesus makes it clear: he is the Good Shepherd, not beliefs or doctrines or buildings or denominations. We must follow him and him alone. Jesus' sheep hear his voice and respond to his voice, not the voices of people who think like them or act like them or even necessarily believe like them. Jesus' people hear Jesus' voice. Jesus, the Son of God, who is one with the Father, is the Good Shepherd. He speaks to his people to guide them to good pasture. He speaks to them through the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. He speaks to them in prayer. He speaks to them as they obey and honor him minute by minute, day by day.

He alone can keep them from danger—forever. But his people have to depend on him alone. We can't depend on other authorities or other people or our traditions or our upbringing or our education. All of those things are sources of self-esteem, not a sheep characteristic. Jesus said, **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all ; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."** When we're in Jesus' hand, we're in the hand of God. No one, nothing can snatch us away. We may suffer, just as Jesus did. We will go out of our comfort zones—Jesus certainly did. But by

following the Good Shepherd, the outcome for us is assured and guaranteed: we are his forever. Who's your shepherd?

Let us pray.

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. **AMEN.**