

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10:22-30

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

22At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." 25Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; 26but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30The Father and I are one."

DIAGNOSIS: "You Do Not Believe"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Questioning the Shepherd*

The Feast of the Dedication was Hanukkah, a very fitting time for Jesus and the other Jews to be in the temple (a temple destroyed already a generation ago at the time the Gospel of John was written and first read). Hanukkah celebrates the successful revolt of the Jewish Maccabees against the troops of the Seleucid Dynasty that had occupied and desecrated the temple. The story of the cleansing and rededication of the

temple would have been familiar to all Jews of Jesus' time and would have been on their minds this day. (See 1 Maccabees 4:36-59 and 2 Maccabees 10:1-8.) No doubt the occupation of the Roman Empire that they were then experiencing would also have been on their minds. So, it is not surprising to hear people ask Jesus on this day to state clearly whether he is the Messiah. The words that the NRSV translates, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" (v. 24), imply that the questioners' very souls have been taken, and they are not themselves. They want to know if Jesus is going to restore them and bring them back into their own. Is he the shepherd whom God has promised?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Not Trusting the Shepherd's Answer

Jesus responds by saying that he has already answered this question many times over, but they just don't "get" his answer. In everything he does and says he is restoring people to their integrity. He is leading them in right paths in his Father's name. If these testimonies to Jesus' collaboration with God are not acceptable to his questioners, Jesus wonders how it will help matters simply to say, "I am the Messiah." If they do not experience him as the Messiah, his words will mean nothing. The only way to know whether Jesus is the Messiah is to follow him, like a sheep under the care of his shepherd's staff.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Sheep without a Shepherd

In this text, John makes clear the irrational paradox that we humans often create for ourselves. These are sheep conducting an interview about the role of shepherd. They have the job description in hand; they know the necessary qualifications and what needs to be done. All that is lacking is a "leader" to realize their vision. But Jesus is no such follower-leader. This Messiah is not biddable, but claims the ultimate authority, saying, "The Father and I are one" (v. 30). What real Messiah

would have any less authority than that? But maybe we don't really want a Messiah; the sheep pick up stones to kill the shepherd (v. 31).

PROGNOSIS: “No One Will Snatch [You] out of My Hand”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Sheep with a Good Shepherd*

Sheep without a shepherd die. Every identity that we have is very fragile. An identity based on nationality can be taken by force, as can a personal identity based on health, wealth, skill or reputation. In this text, Jesus promises his sheep that the life he builds for his flock remains throughout all the ages because it is rooted in the integrity of God, out of whose hand nothing can be taken by force. Then, as was his custom, Jesus lived out the meaning of his words by rising from death after he was killed so that the sheep, even the ones who killed him, would not be without a shepherd.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Trusting the Shepherd*

Death did not erase Jesus' memory. He knows his sheep by name: “Mary!” (John 20:16), “Simon son of John” (John 21:15); and they recognize his voice. When Jesus says, “I love you,” as he does so often in John's gospel, his sheep believe him, and he gives them no cause to doubt it. In John's gospel, even those opposed to Jesus admit that he has caused no harm to them or to anyone (John 10:32-33, for example). Those who respond to Jesus' voice find themselves glad in his presence because with him their life is real. Like Jesus himself, they walk with royal integrity, even when surrounded by those who hate them, because they are sure that they are “in the house of the Lord,” full of “goodness and mercy...all the days of [their] life” (Psalm 23:5-6).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Following the Shepherd

Jesus' sheep follow him, even into the dark valley, and they do not get lost. Tabitha, for example, whose life was spent in sustaining the lives of widowed women, dies and is raised (Acts 9:36-43), foreshadowing what will happen to Peter, whose prayer raised Tabitha. Peter was himself following Jesus, feeding Jesus' sheep until he, like Jesus, was taken where he did not wish to go (John 21:17-19) and was killed. The book of Revelation expresses confidence that for all who go through "the great ordeal" (Revelation 7:14), like Peter, "the Lamb [Jesus] at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17).