

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide**

**John 10:23-30; Psalm 23; Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17**

**John 10:23-30** can only be understood within the context of the entire passage. Earlier, in four statements coming very close together, Jesus had given four “I AM” messages. Twice, he had said, “I am the gate (for the sheep)” (10:7, 10:9). And twice he had declared, “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 10:14).

First, Jesus had stated that he was “the gate for the sheep”. He had declared that he – and not the Law of Moses nor the Jerusalem Temple nor even the interpretation by the Pharisees of the Law – is the entrance into wholeness of life. Only Jesus, he had declared, is the entrance; there is no other. So the only question is whether you Pharisees recognize that entrance and accept it.

Second, Jesus stated that he is “the good shepherd”. He is not simply entrance into the shalom community (“the gate”). He is the one who makes sacrifice to enable the community to be formed. It is not the sacrifices made in the Temple that absolves from sin; it is the sacrificial act that Jesus makes through the surrender of his life that provides both absolution of sin and entrance into God’s community (10:11). Because of such a sacrifice, people will know that Jesus is the authentic shepherd. He will not be taken for an employee who has no real investment in the care of the sheep (Jesus, of course, is implying that the pharisees and priests are such employees), and who will abandon them if the confrontation becomes too intense or the stakes too high.

The challenge Jesus placed before the Pharisees, therefore, was “Will you join Jesus as he seeks to be “gate” (entrance) and “good shepherd” (redemptive sacrifice) to the world and the people of God? Or will you prove to the people that you are a “thief”, “stranger” and “hired hand” (three negative images Jesus uses in this passage to describe Israel’s religious leaders) by refusing to make public commitment to Jesus and the kingdom of God”?

Jesus’ call to commitment sets the believing Pharisees into consternation (10:19-21). And they are joined by some “Judeans” – the Jerusalem ecclesiastical hierarchy or the priests. Some are saying, “This man has a demon and is out of his mind”. But other leaders are saying, “These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind” (vs. 21)? So, Israel’s leadership remains divided in opinion, unwilling to make a commitment, still “limping between two opinions”. They do not realize that their very refusal to make a decision and to come down clearly and publicly on the side of Jesus is to actually make a decision against Jesus. So by their confusion and inaction, Israel’s leaders build the opposition to Jesus.

Today’s Gospel lesson follows upon this teaching of Jesus, his confrontation of Israel’s religious elite and their resulting confusion. They cry for a clear word from Jesus, so that they can either embrace him (which is unlikely, except for a few) or they have the grounds to reject and even kill him. “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly”, they demand.

Jesus’ response is very calculated. “I have told you, and you do not believe”, he responds. “The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not

belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand" (10:25-29).

In his response to his accusers, Jesus simply repeats the claims he had made earlier (see 5:31-47; 8:28-29, 38; 10:14-16). "I have already told you plainly who I am", Jesus is saying. "What more can I say? You do not embrace my claims because you don't want to believe me".

Why do Israel's leaders not believe in and embrace Jesus as God's anointed one to bring in God's kingdom upon Israel? "You do not believe" Jesus in essence suggest, "not because you are dense or stupid, but because you frankly do not want to believe. For you to believe would be for you to give up too much of your power, plenty and prestige. You can't believe in me and yet at the same time go on dominating, oppressing and exploiting this people. So you don't want to believe. What you want me to do is to give you the grounds upon which you can have me executed as a traitor and a subversive against this Roman state. And I won't give you that opportunity until I am ready to do so!"

But then Jesus presses his argument to the point where there is no retreat. He says to these political leaders hiding behind the cloak of their religiosity, "The Father and I are one" (vs. 30).

What Jesus is saying here is of crucial importance both for the church and for these leaders who so badly want to have sufficient cause to execute him. "The Father and I are one". But what does Jesus mean by that? The Greek word translated "one" (*hen*) is neuter, not masculine. Thus, Jesus is not saying "the Father (he) and I (me) are (he/me) one". That is, he is not stating that God and he is one person. What he is saying is that God and Jesus are united in one mission. They are united in the same work. Therefore, to criticize the work Jesus is doing is to criticize God's intentions for the universe. Jesus and God are co-workers, united in building God's kingdom upon the earth. The work of either of them cannot be distinguished from the work of the other!

The response of the Judeans, the Jewish leadership, is predictable. Jesus is speaking blasphemy. From the perspective of these ecclesiastical/political leaders, one can make only one of three conclusions about Jesus' words. Either he is speaking blasphemy, or he is deluded or he is right! And, obviously, Jesus is not the latter two. He is clearly not insane. And it is simply unthinkable to consider the other alternative – that is, that what he is claiming is, in fact, true – that God and he are truly one in work and intention for the world. Therefore, the only viable alternative is that he is speaking blasphemy!

The results are inevitable. "The Judeans took up stones to stone him (the appropriate response to blasphemy, dictated by the Law). Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands" (10:31, 39).

**Psalm 23** continues the shepherd and sheep motif. The problem with this psalm, however, is that it is so well known that we recite it for its beauty and the comfort that it provides, rather than

taking seriously its implications. So let's look at those implications, particularly in the light of the Gospel Lesson for today.

First, the psalmist begins, "Yahweh is my shepherd." The task of the shepherd is to both guide the sheep and to protect the sheep. It is to give direction and to provide a comprehensive vision for the sheep because otherwise, sheep will simply graze from one patch of grass to another without giving any thought to where they are going or what they might be getting themselves into. Likewise, the role of the shepherd is to protect the sheep, because they have no real defense against any who might be their "enemy" – whether human, other animals, or nature itself. Therefore, for the psalmist to declare, "Yahweh is my shepherd" is to suggest that it is in being in relationship with God that gives us both direction and protection in our lives.

What is significant about this passage, however, is that the metaphor, "shepherd" is used for God. In John 10:11 and 14, Jesus uses the metaphor for himself ("I am the Good Shepherd"). And so that there is no question about what Jesus is actually doing in using that metaphor for himself, he uses a linguistic term that was thoroughly unacceptable and would never be used by Jews in his day. He says "I AM the Good Shepherd"!

When Moses asked God his name, God responded "I AM WHO I AM; so tell them that I AM sent me to you" (Exodus 3:14). God's reply is virtually impossible to translate into English, because what God did was to name himself by using an early form of the Hebrew verb "to be", rather than a proper noun (which is what you would expect God to have used). In Hebrew, the word that would be spoken would be "Yahweh", but that is not a name; it is a verb. The only way we can communicate into English the uniqueness of the words is to capitalize all of its letters ("I AM WHO I AM" or "I AM"). .

One would say, "Yahweh". But by Jesus' time, that name had become so precious that it was never spoken by a Jew, not even by the high priest. If Jews wanted to speak of God, therefore, they would combine the verbs of the name "Adonai" ("Lord") with the consonants of "Yahweh" to get "Jehovah" (which was, consequently, a manufactured name). Because the name was sacred, no Jew would use the words "I am"; rather, they would find some other way of communicating the same thought (e.g., "He who is presently standing before you is the Good Shepherd"). Therefore, for Jesus to say, "I AM the Good Shepherd", he would be communicating to any good Jew that he was Yahweh; he was God! What such a statement would accomplish for a Jew would be, first, utter shock, and second, immediate identification with the Psalmist's statement in Psalm 23, "Yahweh is my shepherd!" Therefore, all that Psalm 23 would suggest of God's being and activity toward us would automatically be transferred over to Jesus. No wonder the political, economic and religious hierarchies of Jesus' day were offended at Jesus' words!

What is it, then, that God (Jesus) would do for Israel, for God's "sheep"? The Psalm makes two particularly powerful statements. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (vs. 5a). "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me" (vs. 4a).

What is significant about these statements is not only what is said, but what is not said! The psalmist does not promise that God will deliver us from “the darkest valley” nor will we be delivered from “the presence of my enemies”. Life will continue to have significantly dark times. And we will continue to face opposition, resistance and even hatred.

What the psalmist does promise us, however, is God’s presence (Jesus’ presence) in the midst of our darkest time. We will be emboldened, equipped and given perseverance to face into those dark times of oppression, domination and exploitation.

An even-more powerful metaphor is used by the psalmist in the statement, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies”. But who are “my enemies”? The immediate assumption is that it is people whom the one reciting the psalm doesn’t like and who don’t like him or her. But it is far more than that. I would suggest that “my enemies” is the Psalmist’s reference to the systems! It is Israel’s political, economic and religious powerful and the structures and organizations that lay behind these powerful ones – structures and regulations used by them to keep the people under control and to take full economic and political advantage of them. It is exactly those forces in society that John refers to as “the Judeans”! And when the informed Jew reads of “my enemies” in this passage, he or she will not be able to do other than remember Ezekiel’s reference to them as “evil shepherds” (Ezek. 34:1-10).

When we hear the term, “shepherds”, we immediately think of the clergy “shepherding their flock” or congregation. But that was not the primary use of the word “shepherd”, either in Israel or in the ancient world. The term “shepherd” was used exclusively for the political leaders of a nation (e.g., Num. 27:16-17; I Kings 22:17). So Ezekiel was making quite a statement when he wrote of the powerful leaders of Israel and of the systems through which they functioned, “Ah, you shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? But you eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (34:2-4).

The Psalmist is making a profound statement by using the metaphor of God setting a table for God’s people so that we can dine with God “in the presence of my enemies”. He is, first, making a political statement – that those powerful in our society who the people depend upon to most have the people’s interests at heart and to better their condition, are actually those who will most take advantage of the people and use them for the economic and political enhancement of the leaders themselves. The political, economic and religious leaders are the true enemies of the people. And they, like other wolves, are in our very midst! They have infiltrated our very society, for they are at the core of our political, economic and religious systems. And they put themselves forward as our shepherds, but in reality are ravenous wolves (Ezek. 22:23-27), for they see us only as victims with whom they can take advantage!

But, second, “you prepare a table before me in the presence of (such) enemies”. The Psalmist is saying that God sets a table for his people so that they can dine with God “in the presence of these enemies”. The political, economic and religious systems will still be there, seeking to take advantage of us, trying to intimidate us with their supposed power, continuously “in our face”!

But they will not conquer us who can analyze, understand and know how to thwart their abuse of power. They will not be part of the banquet. They will not be invited to share God's bounty. They will be excluded because they choose to exclude themselves by abusing their position and by seeking to take advantage of the poor. The banquet of life will not be out of their sight. It will be in the midst of the people's engagement in public life. That is where the obedient follower of Yahweh will be, contending for justice, equity and a Godly relational culture. And that is where God (Jesus) will be, sustaining and shepherding us to be the world-changers we are called to be!

The conclusion we must draw is this: Psalm 23 is not the fuzzy, warm, gentle psalm we emasculate it to be. It is, in reality, an extremely strong political statement, holding the systems accountable for their abuse of power, and calling God's people to join God in being about the Godly task of shepherding the world (and its systems) into the world as God intended it to be.

**Acts 9:36-43** witnesses to the reality that, just as Jesus and God are one in their common mission to the world, so is the church and Jesus. In this story, the church is symbolized in the person of Peter, who is their titular leader.

In this story of the resuscitation of Tabitha, the text tells us that this woman (also called Dorcas) "was devoted to good works and acts of charity" (9:36). She became ill and died, and Peter is sent for. He arrives, and finds the room in which Tabitha is lying in state filled with "all the widows, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them" (vs. 39). Peter has all of them leave the room and speaks to the corpse, "Tabitha, get up". She awakens from death and sits up. Luke concludes the story, "Then calling the saints and the widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord" (vss. 41b-42).

What is particularly significant about this story is its close parallelism to the healing story involving Jesus that is found in Mark 5:35-42 (about which Luke would have certainly known) as well as the story Luke himself told in Luke 7:11-17. In both stories, Jesus raised a person from the dead. But the Mark story contains intriguing parallels.

In the Mark story, a child became ill and died, and Jesus was sent for. He arrives, and finds the room in which the child is lying filled with mourners. He has them leave the room, and then speaks to the corpse, "Little girl, arise". She awakens from death and sits up. Jesus then invites all in to show she is indeed alive, and they "were overcome with amazement" (5:42). The parallels with this story of Peter's raising of Tabitha are startling. In fact, with just the change of names, the two stories are almost identical.

What is particularly significant, however, are the words used by both Peter and Jesus. In Aramaic, Jesus said to the corpse, "Talitha cum". In Aramaic, Peter said to the corpse, "Tabitha cum" – nearly identical words! This is particularly noteworthy, in that Luke is very careful to explain that the woman named Dorcas ("gazelle" in Greek), who was apparently well known in the church, had the name "Tabitha" ("gazelle") in Aramaic. In fact, he mentions it in this short

story twice. It is clear that Luke intentionally wants Peter to use very similar words to those used by Jesus in that Gospel healing story.

What Luke is seeking to communicate in this story is that the church is, in its action and mission, Jesus Christ alive and at work today. As God and Jesus are one in their common mission, so are Jesus and the church “one” as well. Because the church is the body of Christ, it is acting like Christ alive today when it gives itself over to its mission of “bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the Year of Jubilee”. “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (John 14:12).

**Revelation 7:9-17** is the next psalm of praise that appears in the book of Revelation. This hymn has three distinct emphases within it.

First, “I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (7:9). In the previous passage (7:1-8) it was stated that there were 144,000 who would be redeemed, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes. Now, the author is stating that there is to be “a great multitude that no one could count” who will embrace the gospel. In this way, John is proclaiming both limited and universal atonement. On the one hand, John is contending that all those who are to be redeemed are chosen by God (vss. 1-8), 144,000 in total, and all are Jews. On the other hand, he is further stating that there will actually be a great multitude beyond human capacity to count that will embrace Christ as savior and Lord, and that they will be “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”. The church will be a universal church, called out from every nation, every ethnic group, and every language in the world.

Thus, John is speaking an important word to the seven struggling churches in Turkey. He is saying, “You may feel like you are very little groups, small in number and struggling to survive. But you are only those leading the parade. Behind you is going to come a great multitude of people – 144,000 in number – no, even far greater than that because the Christian movement will become far greater than even 144,000. Eventually, there will be so many people that no one will be able to number them, and they will come out of every nation, every people and every language on the earth. This little struggling Christianity that you are use to will someday become a universal faith spread throughout the whole world and will dominate the earth. It will far exceed in scope the Roman Empire, for it will be a faith for the whole world.” And, of course, John was right!

Second, the actual hymn of praise the gathered people raise to God and to Jesus is particularly noteworthy. “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb. Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen” (7:10, 12). This is a very significant and specific recognition being given to God the Creator and Redeemer (Father and Son). The term, “Savior” and the praise “salvation to the one seated on the throne” was a term reserved exclusively by Roman law for the Roman emperor. Further, this litany was the praise given to that emperor (normally, his name was inserted where “our God” is stated in verse 10). It was to the “genius” (the God-

impregnated divinity) of the emperor that his court would declare, “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to (the emperor’s name) forever and ever”. This was how he would be greeted at every public gathering where he was present.

It is therefore intriguing that John uses exactly the titles given to the emperor and the recitation of these titles in the praise he reports that the church gives to God the Creator (Father) and Redeemer (Son). And that church is so vast in population that the court is filled with people as far as the eye can see, a company far, far greater than any gathering the emperor would stage to be honored.

In other words, this passage is meant to embarrass the emperor and the Roman Empire! The emperor and his empire is “small potatoes” next to the power of God the Creator and Redeemer, for Jesus is the authentic emperor and his empire is of the entire world and not just of Rome!

Third, this hymn declares what God will do and God’s people will do to make possible this great empire (kingdom) of God. What God’s people will do is captured in 7:13-14: “Then one of the elders addressed me (the author), saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one who knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Rome won’t yield to the transformational power of Christ without a fight. And neither will any other political (nation, kingdom) nor economic (feudalism, capitalism, socialism) nor religious (the Jewish priesthood, the Roman religions, paganism) entity. None of the powers of the world is willing to share power with the King of kings. Each wants to totally dominate. But God will not have it so. These systems and any other systems created by humans will yield to the gospel and to Christ. It is inevitable.

But how will they yield? How will God’s kingdom be built? It will be built upon the *martyrs* of the church – not only they who give their actual lives for Christ, but also all those who refuse to compromise with the political, economic and values-creating systems of their own society, and who pay the price for that refusal to compromise. “The blood of the martyrs will be the seed of the church”. The subjects of Jesus will conquer Rome and every other system of the world. But they will conquer, not by being revolutionaries nor by using violence, but by love, by giving up the benefits of each society rather than to oppress the powerless and to exploit the poor, and even in some cases, by giving up their lives. The church will conquer the world and establish God’s kingdom by “having washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”.

But God’s people will be empowered to do what they are called by God to do because it is God the Creator and Redeemer who works through them and empowers them to do what they do. The transformation of the world into God’s kingdom will occur because of who God is and how God works in the world. The author sings:

“For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb 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” (vss. 15-17).

Working through God’s people, God will also work within them, making them impervious to the demands and pressures placed upon them to compromise. He will minister to them, sheltering, feeding and providing drink for them in the midst of the vicissitudes of life. God will not protect them from either the evil consequences of the systems’ policies or the inevitable pains of life. But God will enable them to conquer those evils and pains, and triumph over them. For God will “guide them to springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”. So God’s people doing God’s work in God’s timing will contribute to the inevitable coming of God’s kingdom upon the earth, as history reaches its apex crying “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God and to the Lamb!”

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