

Sermon for 4 Easter, Year C
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Holy Nativity, Plano
29 April, 2007

Our Gospel reading is the climax of Jesus' public ministry in John's Gospel. He has been teaching about himself as the Good Shepherd. And he has been gathering about himself a flock, who are ones who can recognize the shepherd when he speaks. The Jewish leaders have a problem. How to deal with Jesus? On the one hand, they know he has performed many miraculous signs. He has even given sight to the man who was born blind. On the other hand, he has made some startling and perhaps blasphemous claims about himself and his relationship with God. Some of these leaders think that Jesus is demon possessed. But some say, "Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" None of them, however, can take seriously what Jesus actually says about himself.

So now it is winter, Chanukah in fact. That's the feast of the Dedication, when they celebrate the rededication of the temple after the sacrilege of the Greek king of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes. (Remember him?) Antiochus had sacrificed to Zeus on the altar of the temple, leading to a revolt of the Jews led by the Maccabees. Exactly three years later, the revolt was successful and the victorious Maccabees reconsecrated the temple to the Lord. The anniversary of this event is marked by eight days of lamp lighting and celebration.

In the midst of all this, Jesus is walking around the outside of the temple, minding his own business. But the Jewish leaders have been worrying about this problem that they have with Jesus. So when they see him there, they surround him in order to get him to talk to them again. Then they ask him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." You see, if he just says that he's the Messiah, then they will know how to deal with him. They think they know what the Messiah is supposed to be and do. It's all this other whacky stuff that they can't deal with.

And Jesus responds in the plainest terms yet. "Look, I've told you who I am. I've worked miracles that point to my reliability. You just don't believe me. It all comes down to the fact that you are not my sheep, because if you were, you would follow me rather than examining me." All the evidence is out there. The choices are clear. Jesus may use cryptic language sometimes in order to expand his hearers' understanding of the subject. But he hasn't exactly minced words in such arguments as "You are of your father the devil." and "Before Abraham was I am." Those are extracts from his last conversation with these folks.

That's one of the wonders of this whole scene. The last contact he had with the people John calls "the Jews" ended with them trying to stone him. And here

he is still patiently trying to explain himself to his enemies. Even now, with those who seemingly don't belong to his sheep, Jesus offers the blessings of being part of his flock. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. ...no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Here is the clearest statement that Jesus makes of his claim to be God. And of course, that is the reason he can offer us the assurances that he can. If he is not one with the Father, then he cannot make any claims like "no one shall snatch my sheep out of my hand." Only God could mend what we have broken. We can't. And yet the Jews want something over which they have control. And they certainly don't have control over Jesus. Even his closest friends don't have control over Jesus. He only obeys his Father.

And so they take up stones to kill him with. And even then, for the next nine verses after our reading, he is trying to reason with them. Even as they try to stone him, Jesus is offering the truth and blessing. There is always the chance that one of them will be a Paul.

Just as the Jews had a problem, so do we. Jesus' call to us as the Good Shepherd is one that offers great hope and joy and security. No one will snatch us away from him. We have a symbolic picture of the eternal life that he offers in our reading from Revelation. No sorrow or pain, only life and light and joy forever. But Jesus also still makes outrageous claims about himself, his relationship with the Father, and his relationship with us. He claims to direct us with all authority. We can choose to reject those claims, to pursue what we want when we want it, to grumble at the loss of place and rank that Jesus seems to threaten. Or we can embrace the joy of following the Good Shepherd to green pastures and living waters, even when the way is hard.

Are we among his sheep, or not?