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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, May 8, 2022

4th Sunday of Easter/Year C

First Reading: Acts 9:36-43

Second Reading: Revelation 7:9-17

Gospel Reading: John 10:22-30

Sermon Title: “Do You Hear the Voice of the Shepherd?”

Theme

Jesus responds to questions about his identity with the remarkable claim that he and the Father are one. Those who understand this are his sheep; they hear his voice, follow, and will never be snatched from his hand.

Texts:

First Reading: Acts 9:36-43

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Second Reading: Revelation 7:9-17

⁹After this 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, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”
¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four
living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,
¹²singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white,
and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that 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.

¹⁵For 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.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷for 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.”

Gospel: John 10:22-30

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.”

Sermon

"Do You Hear the Voice of the Shepherd?"

Allow me to clarify my question: By "the Shepherd" I am referring to Jesus Christ, our Lord. And by "do you hear the voice of the Shepherd," I am not necessarily referring to an auditory voice, one that can be heard with your ears – perhaps you can - but I am also including the whispering of the Holy Spirit in your consciousness reminding you of what Jesus said and taught and guiding you in all truth? I hope you do, and that is what today's Gospel Reading and Sermon are all about as we await the Day of Pentecost, that celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church.

We are in Chapter 10 of John's Gospel and by this time Jesus was easily recognized because he had gained quite a reputation as a powerful prophet, preacher, teacher, and performer of signs and miracles. Today we would say that he had *buzz*, people were talking about him, and more specifically they wondered if he might be the Messiah.

Verse 22 referred to the *Festival of Dedication*, and noted that "it was winter." We Gentiles know the Festival of Dedication as the celebration of Hanukkah. If you don't know the story of Hanukkah, then I encourage you to read it in First and Second Maccabees, two books in the Apocrypha. Hanukkah, also known as the Festival of Lights, is a Jewish festival commemorating the recovery of Jerusalem and subsequent rededication of the Second Temple at the beginning of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BCE. That intertestamental event was a big deal because the Jews thought it demonstrated the faithfulness of God to the Jews, through the raising up of one, Judas Maccabeus, who for a short time, returned the Jewish state to independence. But where they, the Jews, got confused was that God was not as concerned about an independent Jewish state as God was concerned about the faithfulness of the Jewish people. Looking back in Old Testament history, God alone would fight the battles for them, if they would just trust him. But as is often the case in the entirety of human history, we often resort to our own human strength and wisdom rather than trust God.

Back to the Gospel Reading, it probably took place in the winter of the year 29 CE. Jesus was visiting the Temple in Jerusalem with his Disciples in tow when he was waylaid and interrogated by a group whom John simply identified as "the Jews." It is unclear just who "the Jews" were, but the setting would indicate that they were not the average Jewish peasant laypeople, but more than likely Sadducees, Pharisees, priests, scribes, or other very religious people.

What they demanded from Jesus was that he clear up the mystery of his identity. He had been doing ministry for perhaps two and a half years and his reputation continued to grow and preceded him, and frankly, the religious establishment was 1) jealous of the attention he was gaining, and 2) concerned that he was leading the Jews away from what they thought was orthodox Judaism.

Their specific question was,

^{24b}"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

In the original Greek language the question is literally, "How long are you taking away our life?" or more like "How long will you continue to annoy us?" Since it is difficult to translate, scholars are divided as to whether the question expressed suspense and genuine interest, or irritation and hostility. To which I ask, "Would there have been a right answer that Jesus could have given them that would have satisfied them?"

I say no because Jesus answered that he has already answered them and yet they do not believe. Then he went on to say that his works testify to his relationship with God, his Heavenly Father.

In my opinion, Jesus' works, his signs and miracles, are often misunderstood. While it is true that Jesus could and did perform them, it was always because he was in a situation where he could demonstrate God's love, grace, and mercy, and love of justice and righteousness.

When Jesus encountered the deaf, the blind, the lame, or the mentally impaired and healed them, he was restoring them to the person God had in mind at their creation.

The signs that he performed, (i.e., feedings the multitudes, turning water into wine, walking on water) were intended to demonstrate the power of God given to him so that others would come to know the true loving nature of God, his Heavenly Father, and to believe that God had sent him. This is what Jesus meant when he said,

²⁵“I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.”

Of course, he knew that wouldn’t satisfy them; that they wouldn’t understand his answer or believe that he was sent from God, and so he went on with what I think is the most important phrase in this passage. He said,

²⁶you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

It is this passage that intrigues me and has caused me to challenge us with the question, *"Do You Hear the Voice of the Shepherd?"* And this is where I would like to spend the rest of my time with you.

For Jesus to say “You do not belong to my sheep” is to imply that the Jews, those who were questing his identity, were wicked. They cannot see the truth because they follow wicked shepherds, (i.e., wicked leaders). So a precursory question is,

"Do you consider yourself one of Jesus' sheep?"

And the question is easy to answer because Jesus gave the criteria for an answer. He said,

²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

So, the sheep of his fold, his faithful followers, are those who, through the Holy Spirit, discern his voice and know his teaching, and respond appropriately to his guidance. Do you consider yourself one of Jesus' sheep; one of his faithful followers? If you do, then your life ought to be radically different than those who do not. Hearing and doing are what define his sheep; his faithful followers.

However, his exhortation, his challenge to those of us who consider ourselves his sheep, his faithful followers, is to get out of our comfort zones and trust what we

have been taught, witnessed, and are guided into, and allow ourselves to explore what belief in him as the messiah and Lord means. It means to trust him in all of our life's battles like the Jews never could. Judas Maccabeus remains a hero within Judaism and that is why Hanukkah is such a big deal. But Maccabeus was just a mortal person, like you and me. He did not trust God with his life and the lives of the Jews, and so eventually, he and the Jews were defeated and once again found themselves under the domination of another foreign nation.

Those who are not his sheep, the Jews in this story, and those who do not consider themselves his faithful followers cannot trust what belief in him can mean because they are locked into what is comfortable and known.

Jesus' answer to the questions of the Jews is that he is both more than and other than traditional expectations of the messiah. His power is not that of a political liberator who will restore Israel to its former glory; it is the very power of God, and the power of God is often not militaristic.

For Jesus to be God's Messiah and our Lord requires faith. It requires relationship. God in Christ calls us into relationship, and as we all know, relationships are never easy. They take work.

Faith in Christ today is still difficult, maybe just as difficult as when this story took place. But still today, Jesus invites all into the mystery that is God. All that is required is an open heart and mind and to follow him as Messiah and Lord of our lives. If we truly believe in him as God's Messiah and Lord of our lives then we ought to live out our lives of faith in confidence and trust so that we become the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Here is what I want to challenge you with today: Presuming we are the ones who hear Jesus' voice, what does it mean to follow him and be obedient to him? Although this Gospel Reading leaves this question unanswered, there are hints in the First and Second Readings.

In the First Reading from Acts, we learn that Jesus' flock, the faithful followers, do good works and acts of charity following the example of Tabitha. And doing acts

of mercy, demonstrations of faith, and living a life lacking in prejudice following the example of Peter.

And from the Second Reading from Revelation, we learn that Jesus' flock, the faithful followers will live faithful lives even when, and especially when, faced with adversity.

So finally, let me conclude where I began, by asking you, Jesus' flock, the faithful followers, "*Do You Hear the Voice of the Shepherd?*" Because if you do, then your life *is* changed. Now go out and do God's work with your hands and feet.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, though you call every person to a life of faith and trust in your Son and our Lord Jesus, we often resort to our own wisdom and strength. Challenge us always to turn to his example, that we may faithfully love and serve you by emulating his life. And encourage us with your Holy Spirit to be your hands and feet in the world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen