

### “Speak Plainly”

If you have not guessed it by now, today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year on the fourth Sunday of Easter we hear Psalm 23 and a Gospel reading where Jesus refers to himself as shepherd of his flock.

One small phrase is particularly interesting to me about this passage from John. It is where the people ask him “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, **tell us plainly.**” This echoes the request people made of John the Baptizer in chapter one, when they asked:

“Who are you?’ [John] confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said. ”<sup>1</sup>

The people and religious authorities ask John the Baptizer and then Jesus essentially the same thing. In the first case they came out to see John at the Jordan River. With Jesus he has come to them for he is in the Temple precincts during the Festival of the Dedication or as we know it the Festival of Hanukkah.<sup>2</sup> Whether it is Jesus or John the people seem to be eager for a messiah. But they did not trust their own intuition. Rather they needed to be told, and as they said told plainly. Signs, works, miracles, and so forth were not enough for them. They needed Jesus to tell them in no uncertain terms who he was.

However, Jesus tells them that if they were one of his followers they would know. Indeed, they would have no questions because they would know just by the sound of his voice. Jesus tells us that his sheep know the sound of his voice. That is a reference to a practice in shepherding. Several flocks of sheep would be put in a sheepfold for the night to protect them from predators. In the morning the various shepherds would stand outside the gate and call their sheep and they would come to them. One might ask why the sheep would not just follow any one of the shepherds? They followed the sound of the voice of the one who protected them and fed them.

The people who question Jesus are following another shepherd, or perhaps more likely they are lost sheep. Jesus’ response to them is not to condemn them but to invite them into listening. Jesus’ words are words of life. Indeed, at another time he says, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”<sup>3</sup> John the Evangelist in the first verses of this Gospel calls Jesus the preexisting Word of God, and that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”<sup>4</sup> John then shows us how John the Baptizer defers to Jesus and even sends his disciples to follow Jesus. In John’s words he is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:19-23

<sup>2</sup> The *Feast of Dedication* is another name for *Hanukkah*, an eight-day Jewish festival that commemorates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in the 2nd century BCE. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/feast-of-dedication#:~:text=The%20Feast%20of%20Dedication%20is,and%20can%20extend%20into%20January>. accessed May 6, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> John 14:6

<sup>4</sup> John 1:14

<sup>5</sup> John 1:29b

The metaphors can get a little mixed. Jesus is both lamb and shepherd. Just as in other places Jesus is called priest and sacrifice. Jesus is both because of his special nature and fully human and fully divine another apparent conundrum. Jesus is lamb because he is obedient to his father in heaven. Jesus is shepherd because the Father sent him to care for, feed, and teach his sheep, you and me. Jesus is priest and sacrifice because he is the first born of all creation and all was created through him; again a reference to the first lines of this Gospel. He will be sacrificed by the Romans because he preached and taught us to love everyone and not to wield power over others; something that was anathema to the Roman Empire. He is fully human because he is born of a human mother. He is fully divine because that birth was caused by the Holy Spirit.

It all may seem very heady when we talk about it in these terms. That is why Jesus simplifies it to the plainest of speaking; the sound of his voice. Not to trivialize this by any means, but I am sure you have seen those Looney Tunes cartoons where the character is faced with a decision between good and evil. On one shoulder stands a little demon and on the other an angel. Each is whispering advice into the characters ear. We know which is bad and which is good just by their appearance. The character can tell because of the sound of the voice.

So it goes with us. When we listen, really listen for the sound of Jesus' voice and not the sound of our ego, our wants, our inner lusts and desires, we know who is talking and what we should do. But it is not just because it is something we "should" or "ought" to do, it is because we have a symbiotic relationship with the shepherd. Look again at Psalm 23. The Lord provides safety, sustenance, fields of green, resuscitation, and so much more. The Lord also leads us "along right pathways for his Name's sake." God wants us to follow the right paths for they reflect well upon God's name.

Finally, God is like the good shepherd who is always with his sheep. Even when it seems as though all is lost and we are surrounded by nothing but evil and death God is there at our side. We have nothing to fear for we have the assurance of what the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks stated is "one of the most moving sentences in all of religious literature, 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me.'"<sup>6</sup> God is with us in the person of the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. When we have come out of the "great ordeal" and washed our robes in the blood of the Lamb and have gathered at the throne of God it will be said of us:

"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."<sup>7</sup>

That is the Good Shepherd whose love and compassion cares for each of our needs and comforts us all the way home. He cannot speak anymore plainly than that.

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<sup>6</sup> TED Talk by Jonathan Sacks <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMVgX8cXsHA>, accessed May 7, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 7:16-17 NRSV