

C Easter 4
 2013 April 21
 Rev 7.9-17
 John 10.22-30
 "The Shepherd-Lamb"

A devout shepherd happens to lose his favorite Bible while he is out with his flock one day. He is much distressed over the loss of his Bible, but resolves to buy a new one the next time he gets to town. A few weeks later he has left his flock in the care of his son and is talking to another shepherd while his friend is caring for his own flock. Amazingly, one of his friend's sheep walks up to him carrying his Bible in its mouth. The shepherd can't believe his eyes. He takes the precious book out of the sheep's mouth, raised his eyes heavenward and exclaimed, "It's a miracle!" "Not really," says the sheep. "Your name is written inside the cover."

A group of Jewish leaders comes to Jesus while he is walking in the temple. They approach him and ask, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly!" Careful readers have noted that the question actually can be taken in two different ways. First, it could be that these leaders, probably scribes or Pharisees or lawyers, really want to know if Jesus could be the one. Or secondly, they could be looking for him to out and out state that he is the Messiah so that they will have clear grounds for rejecting him, or more evidence for arresting him.

Remember that whenever John refers to "the Jews" in a derogatory manner, he is always referring to a particular group of Jewish leaders, never to Jews in general. What kind of sense would that make? Jesus is himself a Jew, so John couldn't possibly mean to disparage all Jews when he refers to them.

It is worthwhile to spend some time clarifying the setting for this particular interchange, one of many in John's gospel between Jesus and a set of antagonistic Jewish leaders. We are told it is the time of the Festival of the Dedication, what we today know better as the Festival of Hanukkah, which means simply "Dedication." The festival celebrates the rededication of the temple after a Jewish army under the command of Judas Maccabeus finally drove the armies of the Seleucid Empire out of Judea and Jerusalem in the year 165 BC. The king of the Seleucids, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, had desecrated the Jewish temple in Jerusalem by turning it into a center of pagan worship, including erecting in it a statue of Zeus. After the Maccabeans cleansed the temple, it was rededicated, and the Festival of Dedication was celebrated every year following, even to today, to commemorate the cleansing and rededication of the temple.

Why is all of that important? In John's gospel Jesus often travels to Jerusalem during Jewish festivals. Some think that Jesus' presence in Jerusalem during high holy days for the Jews amounts to a challenge to the temple rituals and practices, Jesus saying in effect: I am now the temple. God is no longer worshiped by practicing particular rituals, but in believing in me and my power to save. By believing that the Father has sent me and that we are united in purpose and being.

In particular, when Jesus is walking in the temple during the Feast of Dedication, perhaps he is telling all those who are open to the message that he is also rededicating the temple, or if you like redefining the temple: he is now the true temple of God. He says this in more poetic words to the Samaritan woman whom he meets at a well in chapter 4 of John's gospel.

The Jewish leaders gather around Jesus as he is walking on the temple grounds. "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." If you've spent much time at all in the gospels you know that Jesus rarely answers a question directly. However, in this case Jesus responds, "I have told you and you do not believe. The works I do in my father's name testify to me, but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep."

Jesus tells the leaders that he has told them. We are led to wonder if he has told them plainly or if he means that his works speak so very plainly that they should have their answer.

A common term in some Christian circles these days is "the plain meaning of scripture." The idea is that when we read we should be looking for the basic, clear, straightforward meaning of every passage. There are surely some passages where this plain meaning can be determined, but I believe strongly that there are many others where the plain meaning is not so clear. Furthermore, the effort to impose or coerce a "plain meaning" on some passages of scripture is to do violence to those passages. All of which means that scriptural interpretation is not to be attempted lightly, but carefully, prayerfully, thoughtfully, ideally with others, and always counting on the Holy Spirit for guidance.

When the leaders ask Jesus to speak plainly, maybe they are in the same way asking him to speak in a few words a truth that is much greater than their ability to grasp. The living Word, like the word of God we read in scripture, is typically beyond us and our human efforts to comprehend the immensity and loveliness of the kingdom of heaven.

In the end, no one can describe for you what it is like to love Jesus, to follow Jesus completely, to be in intimate relationship with him, to fully devote one's life to him. You just have to experience that joy yourself. And while the gift of that love and relationship and devotion can be given only by the Holy Spirit, we can make ourselves open to that gift. We can be vulnerable to the sighs of that Spirit. We can say with as much conviction as we can muster: Here I am, Lord Jesus. I am yours. Take me. Use me. Draw me into you. Take away everything that is me, and make me totally yours. And then, of course, we may have to wait, because the gift is given when the Spirit determines. But the gift is worth the wait. It's worth waiting for a lifetime.

Jesus tells the Jewish leaders that they do not believe because they do not belong to his sheep. He continues, "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 it out of the Father's hand."

Jesus spoke of sheep also in the passage from John that we considered last week, taken from chapter 21. There Jesus tells his disciple Peter three separate times that he must care for Jesus' sheep, as you and I must.

You may remember that the tenth chapter of John's gospel is filled with references to sheep and shepherds and thieves. Although the chapter is theologically very rich, and attempts to reduce it to its "plain meaning" are bound to be inadequate, the general theme of the chapter is that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows and cares for his sheep. The sheep know the shepherd's voice. And in the end the Good Shepherd gives up his life for the sheep.

After all of the sheep metaphors in chapter ten, here towards the end Jesus tells the Jewish leaders and whoever else may be listening to him in the temple, that no one can snatch his sheep out of his hand and that no one can snatch them from the Father's hand. That should be immensely comforting for you and for me, us sheep. When we belong to Christ, we belong to Christ forever, and there is nothing in heaven or on earth or below the earth that can snatch us away. The grip of Christ is a mighty grip indeed.

When reading the Revelation of John it is terribly critical that we keep the context of that text in mind. John is writing from exile on an island off the coast of what is today the nation of Turkey. It is very clear from reading the book that the churches to which he is writing are undergoing persecutions at the hands of the Roman government, and in fact in a number of places John refers to members of the church who have been executed. The entire letter is, of course, a call to remain faithful in the face of those persecutions.

Passages in scripture that tell us God will save us from all suffering and trial are surely present in the scriptures, but you can bet their "plain meaning" is not so easily to determine. There are also many passages that promise God's protection and presence during those sufferings and trials are exceedingly numerous. That message resounds again and again in John's revelation. God does not prevent the trials of the churches, but God promises that in the end, God will be the victor. Those who have remained faithful through the tribulations will no longer be hungry or thirsty, and the sun will not strike them any longer. Then John writes this: 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 he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

The message is consistent and pervasive throughout all of the scriptures, throughout John's gospel, and throughout John's Revelation: those who belong to Christ have nothing to fear. There is nothing that can snatch them from his unfailing grip.

You, of course, have known your own suffering and trials. You have lost husbands and wives and children and other dear ones, sometimes after long and exhausting battles with illness. You have been estranged from those you love dearly. You have suffered

the sorrow and anxiety of seeing loved ones walk dangerous and crippling paths. You have lost employment. You have faced financial catastrophes. You have faced your own frightening and debilitating illnesses. You have suffered various addictions. And you have suffered in other ways that I certainly do not know. For some of you the circumstances that generated those miseries are in the distant past, but you still suffer from them. For others of you, the events are recent and the pain is starkly present.

John promises that there is no agony, no suffering, no trial, that can snatch us from the grasp of Christ or from the grasp of the Father. That Jesus will never let us go, even in the chaos of the most overwhelming flood. Nothing can loosen Christ's grip on you or me. He is our shepherd. We are the sheep of his pasture. We hear his voice and follow. He will guide us to springs of the water of life, and he will wipe away every tear.

We cannot be pulled away. We cannot be lost or stolen. We are secure in the unfailing grip of Christ, and therefore we have nothing to fear. Jesus is our shepherd. Jesus is the Lamb standing next to the throne of God who, according to John's revelation, has already, in his sacrifice, won the victory over all those things that would defeat us. Jesus is both Lamb and Shepherd. He is the Shepherd-Lamb.

With the angels and the elders and the four living creatures, we may also fall on our faces before the throne and sing: "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."