

Fourth Sunday of Easter May 8, 2022 (Mothers' Day)

Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17

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."

Good Shepherds, Mom...apple pie—How tempting to romanticize these notions and to bliss out envisioning green pastures, ever-smiling, never stressed families in their many forms and expressions...and of course the pie crust is always flakey and never burns around the edges.

Cue the Reverend Buzz-kill who tells you that Heaven knows—we all know for that matter— the crust burns, families stress out, and shepherds fly into alarm mode when the predators prowl nearby.

Yes, the real world intrudes on nice churchy Mother's Day gatherings. The Good and great news is that God loves the real world and stops at nothing to save it. The Good and great news is that God promises to be fully present with us even when the whole pie burns, and when chaos charges through pastures, homes, and the rest of the world. So much for blissing out over idyllic scenes and languid days.

We're not the only ones to go there. When religious authorities demand that Jesus own up to being a Messiah, Jesus knows better. So much baggage is attached to being a Messiah—Messiahs are supposed to be priestly, making everything around them holy. This same Messiah is expected to be a military conqueror, an administrative genius, and a political wunderkind who makes all our dreams come true.

Jesus isn't going to tell people what they want to hear, so the worst answer he could offer is "Sure, Messiah, that's me". He doesn't say he isn't either.

People have seen enough counterfeit—this is why the Gospel peppers us with details like, "feast of Dedication", "winter" Solomon's portico as setting for Jesus' words to his questioners.

Bible commentaries help us in connecting the dots: Today we know the festival of Dedication as Chanukkah—a season of light that commemorates the rededication of second temple. Resist, if you please the inclination to snooze through history, because this bit is important: Some 160 years before Jesus was born, the Temple had been hijacked by a despot who named himself "the appearance of God". In the process, Antiochus IV outlawed all religious practices the Hebrew people cherished.

So can you blame people who are celebrating the rededication of the Temple to Yahweh for being at least a tad suspicious of Jesus, known for healing people of blindness and feeding crowds of hungry people?

Immediately before this morning's Gospel reading, the religious authorities debated whether Jesus' healing someone from blindness meant he was controlled good or by evil(John 10:21).

Jesus reframes for us who he is and what he's about. He speaks of himself as a shepherd. Even in his day, people sort of knew what shepherds were about, but not always. Most would recognize the songs of the people that

imagine the Lord as a shepherd; feeding, healing, defending, and drawing along side us always. Jesus says he's that sort of shepherd. In fact, Jesus declares he will lay down his life for the sheep.

Earlier, Jesus announces his end game in mid-debate earlier (see John 10:10) when he says he comes not to steal, or kill, or destroy. He comes to give life—abundant life. Jesus brings abundant life in healing those who are sick, comforting those who are tormented, welcoming those who are shunned, and feeding those who hunger.

Now Jesus tells his questioners he offers eternal life—He means eternal as in surely God's goodness and mercy shall cling to us all the days of our lives. He also means eternal as in God takes us in so we live with God forever.

Finally, Jesus says he is about all the things God is about—our translations read Jesus' words as "I and my Father are one". Sadly, Jesus' capstone words prove intolerable for the religious leaders. The verdict and sentence come swiftly as stones are gathered and the religious ranks prepare to stone Jesus to death for blasphemy.

Letting you know this isn't to wreck the story or kill the mood (although it might be feel like a real downer). Consider what Jesus is willing to risk....what God is willing to risk...because God so loved. Then let those images of a Good Shepherd wash over you. Hold on to that. Amen.

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