

Easter 4C (4/17/2016)

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

Our speech about God is rarely plain. Faith is rarely clear-cut. The life of discipleship is filled with subtlety, ambiguity, tension. Our business, however, is not to come to unequivocal conclusions about God, but to follow our Shepherd on the Way – a path fraught with twists and turns, mountaintops and valleys. And, his business is to hold us securely in his promises.

Some years ago, a class at my seminary had t-shirts made with a slogan: “Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago: the place to get all your answers questioned.” It might seem counterintuitive to uphold questioning at an institution of religious education. After all, don’t we want the church to train pastors who can give us the right answers? Life is filled with gray; shouldn’t the church be a place we can go for black and white? This is a very common assumption, that if we somehow come to a correct interpretation of divine things, then we have achieved right faith. Indeed, many people of faith are ready and willing to provide that correct interpretation, that, if we affirm it, we may be counted among the true believers, the righteous ones. But that sounds more like dogma than faith, doesn’t it? That sounds more like intellectual assent to doctrine than trust in a living Lord. If you’re wary of restricting God’s truth too readily to a set of unassailable definitions, then you’re in good company, namely Jesus’.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is notorious for resisting easy answers, and his teaching in our story from John today is no exception. The scene is set in the extensive temple complex in Jerusalem, specifically in the portico of Solomon, a lengthy colonnade named for one of Israel's iconic kings. Jesus' notoriety has stirred the interest of some and the anxiety of others. His questioners approach him with urgency: "How long will you keep us in suspense?" they ask. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." This demand itself leaves room for interpretation. Is it a sincere plea for clarity? Or, is it a trap to catch Jesus in a statement by which they may condemn him?¹

In either case, Jesus gives no simple response. "I have told you, and you do not believe," he says. "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." This is enough to drive any pragmatist crazy. Either Jesus is the Messiah – the Chosen One of God – or he isn't. Yet, he claims that the truth is apparent only to his "sheep," that is, to those who follow him. Jesus' lordship, in other words, is evident in the relationship he establishes with those he claims for himself: "I know my own, and my own know me,"² he affirms earlier in chapter ten.

One interpreter puts it this way: "Jesus' role and identity cannot be reduced to a title; instead his role and identity must be experienced."³ Even if he and his followers were to state his identity over and over, the matter would

¹ See Thomas H. Troeger, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 445-7.

² John 10:14.

³ Gary D. Jones, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 446.

not be put to rest,⁴ as history has long-since demonstrated. Jesus becomes Messiah to us not by external verification, but only by the gift of faith.⁵

Tell us plainly, Jesus' interrogators insist. We desire a straightforward understanding of God, but our speech about God is rarely plain. We crave clarity, but faith is rarely clear-cut. The life of discipleship is filled with subtlety, ambiguity, tension. Even as we have come to know God's heart in Jesus, God's whole truth is also beyond our ability to grasp. Even as God seeks abundant life for us, God also calls us to lay down our lives for each other. Faith encompasses both suffering and hope, death and new life. And the Messiah comes not to conquer, but to be crucified. The Lord comes as a servant, a shepherd.

These are truths that we simply cannot "tell plainly." This is not to say that we should not seek understanding in the life of faith, that we should not study and struggle and strive for greater wisdom. But, earnest faith often requires that we have *all our answers questioned*, that we allow God to renew our minds for the sake of our relationship with the one who has claimed us for himself. After all, our business is not to come to unequivocal conclusions about God, but rather to follow our Shepherd on the Way.

Dear church, the Way is fraught with twists and turns, mountaintops and valleys. But **even in the valley of the shadow of death, Christ leads us,**

⁴ See Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2813.

⁵ See Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism: The Creed: The Third Article, The Book of Concord*, 355-6.

comforts us, and restores us. Our faith, inexplicable as it may sometimes be, rests on his promise: “My sheep hear my voice,” he says. “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.”

***No one will snatch them out of my hand.* For those of us who count ourselves among his sheep, Christ is the bearer of God’s enduring care. From beyond the reach of death, he extends his hand to us – a hand that is scarred by our own hostility, yet that holds us securely. This gracious gesture is the reason for our hope that**

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁶

So, let’s bear Christ to each other. Let’s bear each other’s burdens, and hold each other in our hands. We have scars of our own, not to mention fresh wounds, so let’s hold each other gently, but securely in love, all for the sake of our crucified Lord, our divine servant, our Shepherd.

⁶ Romans 8:38-39.