

A Shepherding God
John 10:22-30
by Rev. Ridgley Joyner

It is the fourth Sunday in the church *season* of Easter—in the *season* of Resurrection—in the *season* where we shout, “HE IS RISEN!” and proclaim God’s promise of new life that Christ embodied for us. In our scripture reading today, the lectionary takes us back *before* that Easter day and for good reasons too—because looking *back* at John 10 can help us look forward as Easter people. While we are here in the *season* of abundant sunshine, blooming azaleas, trilliums and rhododendrons, our scripture reading is in a different season. It isn’t too often we are given such descriptions placing us in the story, but John provides a lot for us here. He tells us--it is the season of winter:

It is also the Festival of Dedication in Jerusalem. The festival of dedication began in 164 BCE to commemorate the rededication of the Second Temple after King Antiochus (anti-oh-chus) IV had defiled it by building a statue to one of his own Gods on the altar of burnt offering. Today we know the Festival of Dedication as the Jewish Holiday, Hannukah.

Scripture tells us that it is during this religious festival that Jesus is in the temple complex—specifically in the portico of King Solomon. This was a space outside the temple, where teaching often happened. It wasn’t just a small porch—this was a HUGE space with large arches—able to hold over 30,000 people.

Jesus has been in Jerusalem for a few months, since the Festival of Booths (the Jewish holiday of Sukkot) in chapter seven. Just before this passage, in chapter nine Jesus heals a blind man by spreading mud on his eyes and restoring his sight. Even though this man could see clearly now, it remains that the Pharisees still do not see—they are blind to what Christ is showing them before their very eyes. This miracle brings about so much confusion about who Christ is. Jesus goes on to reveal himself in his teaching using a metaphor—Christ as the Good Shepherd.

The gospel of John is chock full of references to Jesus’ identity and our passage this morning is no different. Time and time again people are witnessing Jesus performing miracles and hearing his teachings and yet, there were some who were still doubting who he was. They wanted it straight forward— ***How long will you keep us in suspense? Tell us plainly.*** This question from the Pharisees is where our passage begins today

Christ’s teachings and acts are bringing up a lot for the people in Jerusalem and religious leaders—who is this Jesus? Is this man demon possessed? Is what he is saying true? Some are saying he is blaspheming the very name of God by saying that he is the Messiah. Is he the Messiah or is he someone fooling us?

Jesus is *showing* the crowds that he is the son of God, the Messiah, the true vine over and over and over again through his actions. And yet, they’re still curious, they’re still doubting...they’re still skeptical, just like those in the upper room like Thomas asking about the holes in Christ’s hand days after the resurrection.

The Pharisees ask Jesus “How long will you keep us in suspense? Tell us plainly.

Christ answers: I DID tell you. I SHOWED you.

The works I do in my fathers name testify to me.

You see, the Pharisees are trying to understand who Jesus is, and Jesus tells them to look at what he *does*. For Jesus, there is a strong connection between *knowing* and *doing*.

One of my favorite classes in seminary was faith and human development. We studied how one's faith grows as their brain changes and develops and it was fascinating. One of my biggest take aways from that class is the common misconception that parents or caregivers have about passing faith on to their kids. Often, they focus on giving their children the content of faith and especially on taking them places like church for others to teach them about God. But what forms the faith of a child is how they see that being lived out, and the adult they spend the most time with teaches them that. That is why our constitution says that formation begins in the *home*. What children see, becomes what they emulate. There's no suspense—one's actions tell you plainly about God.

A person could speak all day long about the importance of grace, but if they do not embody that with their behavior, their child is less likely to embody that as well. Essentially, parents could take their kids to church every Sunday for 10 years, and if their kids don't see their parents enacting the same teachings and living out their faith, then they're less likely to become faithful adults. Children are *always* watching, no pressure!

Much of the research around young adults leaving church is centered around this idea of authenticity—if the people they see in church are not embodying the gospel with their actions, then they see no need in being affiliated with the religion or the church.

What is modeled for children becomes behavior. And...what is modeled for adults becomes behavior too. If people in positions of authority do something, it gives a message loud and clear, that that behavior is okay too.

Lately, I've been going down a rabbit hole learning about the brain and have come across fascinating research on mirror neurons. In 1980, a scientist in Italy was studying monkeys and their brains, particularly in how they learn from one another. He would measure the brain activity on one monkey while it watched another monkey perform an action. The scientist discovered that when one monkey engaged in an activity, the other monkey's brain fired in the exact same way if he was observing the action.¹ What would fire in their brain is something called a Mirror Neuron. Mirror neurons are brain cells that fire both when we perform an action and when we observe someone else performing the same action. Decades later there have been numerous studies that confirm that humans also have these "Mirror neurons" and further-that these neurons are a big part of what makes us social beings.

Mirror neurons are like a "neural wifi" that helps us track what others are doing in front of us- including movements, intentions and emotions. They activate the same brain areas in us as they do in the person we are observing, bringing about a type of shared experience.

¹ <https://kripalu.org/resources/hardwired-empathy-how-mirror-neurons-connect-us>

This has helped scientists understand how we as humans are “wired for connection” and the neurological basis for empathy.² When I started learning about Mirror Neurons, I immediately remembered what I learned in my faith and human development class: what behaviors, actions, and dispositions children see, they eventually take on.

Moral of Ridgley’s tangent on the brain:

We can’t *just* be armchair Christians who know a lot about God. I’m so struck by Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees because he doesn’t sit and have a theological debate with them. Instead he points to the work he does in the world that points to God.

It is incredibly important to be curious about God, to wrestle with who God is, and even have doubts—but that is not why Jesus came down and lived among us—and it certainly isn’t why he died for us.

We are a people guilty of spending a lot of time learning about God. As Presbyterians our “bible studies” dive into the original language, we study ancient near eastern culture, we bring in scholars as subject experts. I have always found comfort in this curiosity-this doubt-this wrestling with who we truly believe God to be.

But, in our wrestling, we must not miss our God speaking plainly to us—right in front of us even. We can spend all day *talking* about who God is—but it isn’t until we *embody* who God is through our actions, that the world is truly able to understand the Easter message of new life. If we are not careful, we too can be so caught up with discovering who God is that we can neglect what is right in front of us—what God is doing in our midst, telling us plainly who God is.

The reality is that being Easter people isn’t about getting to the point of right belief. We know this because the stories that follow the resurrection are rife with doubt, fear and denial in the face of things that seemed hard to grasp—being easter people is about leaving this portico and having the courage to take steps forward to embody God’s love, grace and mercy in the world with our actions, our behaviors, knowing that through it all our shepherd guides us.

What will our lives tell the world about who our God is?

Will it point to a living God moving around among us, embracing the vulnerable, making space for the outsiders, advocating for justice, comforting the brokenhearted, and feeding those who are hungry, regardless of their identity, their status or story? Will it point to a good shepherd who restores and guides?

Friends, God sends us forth—calling us to live our lives as a testimony to a living God, not just through words, but also through our very lives. May our lives tell a story about a God of robust love, radical inclusion and everlasting mercy. Maybe then, the world would know exactly who God is—no suspense, as plain as day.

In the name of the Father, Son & Holy Ghost...Amen.

² <https://www.6seconds.org/2012/01/16/are-we-wired-for-empathy/>

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year the lectionary pulls us back to this imagery of God as a shepherd and us as sheep. Christ paints a picture of a shepherding God who cares about each and every one of us, knows us by name, who protects us from threatening forces, and the one whom we follow.

But it isn't just in the gospel of John where we hear this metaphor. Jesus teaches using the parable of the lost sheep. Old Testament prophets speak of a messiah who will be like a shepherd for God's people. King David wrote a Psalm we love to read time and time again as balm to our soul—reminding us that our shepherd renews our souls. What a delight it is to be known and know a God who calls us by name, guides us, protects us, empowers us and will never forsake us.

As God's beloved sheep, let us stand together and say what we believe using the ancient sacred words of Psalm 23.

Benediction:

May you leave this place knowing that our Shepherd goes with you. He will lead you by still waters. Protect you from the valley of the shadow of death. He will give you courage to fear no evil and the comfort in knowing that you are held. May you leave this place assured that what matters most isn't status, being free of doubt, or accomplishments—what matters most is that you belong to God, and nothing, NOTHING can change that. Secure in this belonging may you go forth to LIVE the abundant life that Jesus came to give—LIVE the gospel in a world that so desperately needs it.