

BELONGING@**Psalm 23; John 10:22-30****April 17, 2016****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates****Fourth Sunday of Easter**

On this fourth Sunday in the Season of Easter – four weeks after the resurrection celebration, we turn back to remember some of the important things that Jesus said. This Sunday in the Easter Season is usually known, according to the Common Lectionary, as Good Shepherd Sunday.

John seems to think it important to give us information about where Jesus is and when this took place. Jesus is walking along the Portico of Solomon – or Solomon’s Porch. It is winter, we are told; in fact, it is the Festival of Dedication – also known as Festival of Lights – the Jewish name being Hanukkah. It was the latest of the great Jewish festivals to be founded. It is on the 25th of Chislev – the Jewish month that corresponds with our December, and it falls very near our Christmas time.

The Festival of Dedication came about after one of the worst ordeals in Jewish history. Back in 170 BC, the king of Syria named Antiochus Epiphanes – who was a lover of all things Greek, decided he would totally eliminate the Jewish religion and began introducing Greek ways and thoughts, Greek religion and Greek gods into Palestine.

He tried doing it in peaceful ways at first and there were a few Jews who were okay with the new ways, but most were not. Most stayed loyal to the faith of their ancestors.

So, in 170 BC, Antiochus attacked Jerusalem, and, according to scholar commentator, William Barkley, an estimated 80,000 Jews were killed and many others were sold into slavery. A large amount of money and wealth was stolen from the Temple treasury and the Temple courts were profaned; the chambers were turned into brothels and then the great altar of the burnt offering was turned into an altar to the Olympian god Zeus, where swine’s flesh was offered to the pagan gods.

Finally, a man named Judas Maccabaeus, along with his brother – rose up with courage to fight for freedom and won at last in 164 BC. The Temple was cleansed and purified. The altar was rebuilt. And an eight-day celebration was instituted to commemorate the Temple purification and dedication.

Thus it was called the Feast (or Festival) of Dedication. It is sometimes called the Festival of Lights because of the illumination of light in the Temple that each home created as well with the seven branched candlesticks that we associate with Hanukkah.

Along two sides of the Temple were two magnificent portico’s – or porches, as we would call them. The Royal Porch was on the west, and the other was Solomon’s Porch, on the East. They had rows of 45 feet high pillars that were roofed over. People could walk out of the winter weather in that place, and meditate and pray. Rabbis would go there to talk with their students about doctrines of the faith.

I think since John took the time to tell us where Jesus was, it is important for us to know about that place. It was a sacred space, for sure. A place where Jews were reminded of how they were once slaves, and had almost lost the faith – a faith that included waiting for ... expecting ... the promised Messiah.

So, in this place where Jesus is walking on this wintry December day, the Temple Leaders catch up with him. We can't be totally positive about their motives in asking him if he is the Messiah. "Just tell us, once and for all ... are you the Messiah? Are you the one sent from God? How long will you keep us in suspense?"

Perhaps some of those asking sincerely wanted to know. But, it is a pretty sure bet that some of them were trying, yet again (because they had tried on other occasions) to trip him up. They were surely hoping to catch him something he said that would be grounds for stopping him. The modern Greek for that question about keeping them in suspense translates as: "How long will you continue to annoy us?"

And Jesus' answer was: "I've already told you and you do not believe." He went on to tell them that his deeds – the healing, the miracles, the signs – all were indicators of who he was. He said the works I do in my Father's name testify to who I am, but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep."

You know, he had already irritated them after he healed the man born blind and ended up implying that they – the Jewish leaders – were the ones who were blind. Then he had that conversation just before this one about the sheep – those who know his voice – are protected and watched over by the shepherd whom they know.

And he carried this theme on, still in this conversation, leading some to believe he is slightly out of his mind. But Jesus just assures them that they are not part of his fold and that is why they don't recognize him. Why are they not a part of his fold, we might wonder, when they are Jews, Temple Leaders – teachers of the faith that was almost lost to them.

Here they stand in this place at this great Festival of Dedication, commemorating what had been fought for and won back, and yet, they are closed minded about the possibility of who Jesus might be. And because of their closed minds, Jesus says they do not belong to his flock.

Do you ever wonder about your belonging to the flock? If the Temple Leaders don't belong to Jesus' flock, how do we know if we do? Among all the voices we hear in our chaotic world, all the voices demanding our attention – some that even claim to speak for God – how do we recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd?

I like what Elizabeth Johnson wrote about this. She says: "The Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we are known by the shepherd: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (John 10:28). (From Working Preacher.com)

Our Good Shepherd names us and claims us as his. In our baptism we are grafted into his family; into his flock – many of us as infants before we are even aware that there is a flock.

Most of us have had some experience of a time when we felt and knew the presence of Christ close to us, watching over us. Last year, many of you shared some of those experiences during Lent. Experience helps us to have that sense of knowing someone. I think about my mother. I knew her and her love for me by experiencing her, even before I knew for a fact that she was my mother. Everything she did told me she was my mother. She held me, fed me, protected me, spoke tender, loving words to me. I experienced her deep mothering, as a baby in her arms, before I even knew what the word “mother” meant.

Some of us have had that kind of relationship with our parents and unfortunately, some of us have not. And I hope you have had that same kind of loving, experiential relationship with Christ – at least during some great moments in your life. But here’s the wonderful thing. Whether you know by experience or you know him by the faith that the Holy Spirit has planted in your heart, either way or both ways – you belong to the Good Shepherd.

You are a part of his flock and he promises – right there in the cold of winter; on the porch named after the great King Solomon; in the Temple that was fought for and won back and cleansed and dedicated to God – the Son of God stands there in that place; the King of Kings; the greatest Teacher talking to teachers who perhaps think they are great; the Christ who ended up giving his life for his sheep – he is the one who promises that no one and no thing can ever snatch us out of his protective care.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd said, back at verse 10: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” This abundant life isn’t necessarily about having long years, or great wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is a life overflowing with God’s love that Jesus has revealed to us in the cross and in the resurrection. Johnson writes: “It is eternal life because its source is in God who is eternal, and in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life (11:25-26).

These past few weeks I have visited with two people who, soon after that visit, passed away. In this past week, Fred has lost a lifetime, childhood friend. I have recently visited with people whose life has been turned upside down – transitions that are a challenge to accept and adjust to.

We never know when things are going to happen that alters our life in some major way. We have seen on the news the disaster in Japan with the earthquakes and the lives lost and changed. We constantly hear voices telling us we should be afraid; we should be discouraged; we should feel defeated.

But, believe me, that is not the voice of the one you belong to. The Good Shepherd leads us; watches over us; has already given his all for us. His promise is what Paul said later in his letter to the Romans – that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And I close with this thought from Karoline Lewis (Working Preacher.com): “Resurrection is safety... Jesus as Good Shepherd promises protection, (and) the valley of death and depression

and despair are not traveled alone. The shepherd really does protect his sheep. No one will snatch you away. No one. No thing.”

You are here because you belong to him. You are here because you do know his voice. But mostly, you are here because the Shepherd knows and loves you – you belong to him – and no one can snatch you away from him.

Keep your ears open, dear ones, for the voice of the Good Shepherd. He is watching over you and will lead you safely home.

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