

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement  
Florissant, Missouri  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter -- Year C  
May 7-8, 2022  
Acts 9:36-43; St. John 10:22-30  
Revelation 7:9-17

I just finished reading our Gospel Lesson for the day, St. John chapter 10, verses 22-30. So, who remembers what happens in the next verse -- verse 31?

You see, it's the fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday, a Sunday when, in our three-year rotation, we read one of three Gospel Lessons, all from John chapter 10, all of them dealing with the theme of Jesus as our Good Shepherd. So, who remembers what happens in verse 31?

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is also the day when we either say or sing some form of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, a favorite of all of us and a perfect accompaniment to John chapter 10. So, who remembers what happens in chapter 10, verse 31?

Yes, this is Good Shepherd Sunday, a Sunday when church bulletin covers, including our own, will have a "sheep" theme, maybe Jesus carrying a small sheep or sheep grazing on a hillside or Jesus rescuing a lamb from a thicket in the wilderness. So, with all of this pleasant pastoral imagery before us, does anyone remember what happens in verse 31?

Okay, what happens next, after 30 verses of wonderfully calming, soothing, comforting images of Jesus as our Good Shepherd, is that right there in the Temple courtyard some Judeans "surround" Jesus and take up stones intending to stone Jesus to death. Apparently, they didn't get the message, ...or maybe, they did!

Now, that I've got your attention, ...or, at least, I hope I do, ...let's jettison all the bulletin covers for a moment, and figure out what's really happening here. John wants us to recognize that this conversation [no! this confrontation] takes place in Solomon's portico, namely, the king's portico, at Hanukkah. Now, for the good and devout people of Judea, Hanukkah

was a political holiday, celebrating the nation's deliverance some 190 years earlier, from the hated Seleucid empire. Hanukkah was [for want of a better term] a religious holiday, celebrating the restoration and re-dedication of the Jerusalem Temple, three years after the Seleucids had defiled it with their pagan deities. And, it was a royal holiday, celebrating the accession of Judas the Maccabee as Israel's first home-grown king in over 300 years. So, with questions of political rebellion, religious restoration, and authentic kingship on the people's minds along comes Jesus of Nazareth, over whom, the preceding verses make clear, the people are deeply divided, some believing He is demon-possessed, some convinced that He is an agent of YHWH, Israel's God, and hoping He can lead a successful revolt against another foreign power.

So, all of those issues are swirling around, as Jesus is confronted in the king's portico, literally "surrounded," and challenged, once and for all, to identify who He is. "Are you Israel's Messiah?" they demand to know, which is to ask, "Are you Israel's new Judas the Maccabee? Are you the one who will deliver us from foreign oppression, purify the Temple, and accede to the throne as our new king?" Is you is, or is you ain't? Put up or shut up! Make up your mind, and don't keep us in suspense!

Is it any different among us? Like it or not, the spectre of Jesus influences all of Western Civilization and much of the East. And, even among those who claim to love Him and among those who claim to ignore or despise Him there is great ambivalence. Like those in Solomon's portico, we want to plug Jesus into some pre-existing easily-identifiable category, and then demand, "Is you is, or is you ain't?" Put up or shut up!

For some, Jesus is the great mystic, often retreating by Himself to commune with God. For some, Jesus is the great moral teacher, revealing how to live a God-pleasing life. For

some, Jesus is the great social reformer, championing the rights of society's down-and-outers. For some, Jesus is the great benefactor, offering the abundant life to those who believe in themselves and believe in Him. For some, Jesus is the great physician, offering healing, even miraculous healing, to those with sufficient faith. For some, Jesus is a personal companion, walking through the "green pastures" and the "dark valleys" of our lives. For some, Jesus is the new law-giver, exposing the hypocrisy of all who cross His path. For some, Jesus is the great law-breaker, freeing people from the shackles of tradition.

For us, Jesus is, ...well, ...whatever suits our purposes and advances our agenda. Like those in Solomon's portico, we challenge Him either to confirm our suspicions or to validate our categories. "Is you is, or is you ain't?" what we need you to be for us. "Put up or shut up!" we demand.

And, in response, Jesus invokes the image of the Good Shepherd, not to offer soothing consolation or to fit Himself into one of their [or, our] comfortable categories, but to confront them [and us] with the reality of Who He has come to be for them [and for us]! For Jesus is nothing less than the long-awaited return of Israel's Good Shepherd, YHWH, Israel's true King. For right then and there, on Hanukkah, in the king's portico, Jesus says, in effect, "The kind of deliverance you are yearning for is not the kind of deliverance you need. The kind of religious purity you seek is not what God demands. And, the kind of king you long for is not the King Whom God has promised." For YHWH is your Good Shepherd, and YHWH is your King.

Apparently, they didn't get the message, ...or maybe, they did. For, the next thing we know, they have stones in their hands.

You see, Jesus invokes the image of the Good Shepherd to remind them that their true Shepherd, their true King, their true Father, is none other than YHWH Himself. And, by taking YHWH's mantle upon Himself, Jesus makes the claim, right there in the king's portico, that He is indeed their [and our] true Shepherd and true King. A king who will provide the deliverance we truly need. A shepherd who will yet lead us in "paths of righteousness." A God whose coming Kingdom is built on a foundation of justice and mercy and truth and peace. This is the table that He is preparing for those He calls His "sheep." And, right there, at Hanukkah in the king's portico, He returns the challenge. YHWH's true people will heed His voice and will follow Him. "Is you is, or is you ain't?" Jesus wants to know. "Put up or shut up!" And, do you remember what happens next? Will you remember?

Amen