

Tell Us Plainly
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I can identify with the Jews who gathered around Jesus in the colonnade of Solomon's portico. I can identify with people who want some clarity. If you are the Messiah, then stop talking in riddles. Speak plainly. Behave as expected. Make **disbelief** impossible. Take this messy world of murky gray, and turn it black and white, once and for all. If you are going to be a leader, act like a leader. When the world is full of threat and change, tell us plainly what we can do about it. Lead us. Please. Or get out of the way.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always Good Shepherd Sunday: at least that is what those who plan the church lectionary calendar say. On this Sunday we always read Psalm 23. The Gospel this year focuses on the voice of the shepherd, and the sheep hearing that voice, and following. And in the final verse of the dream-like passage from Revelations the writer plays with language and images: Christ is the Lamb who will also be the Shepherd. Somehow, from all these words, written in different times and different places, we are supposed to glean something about how we are led by God. And so we might ask again, "Tell us plainly."

The 23rd Psalm is so familiar and well-used that it may seem foolish to ask for it to speak plainly. In countless Sunday School classes, at countless bedsides, in many funerals, we hear these familiar words. It has a strong grip on us. It seems such a simple statement that it can bear its own witness without comment. It is a psalm of confidence. It speaks in detail, with rich metaphors of a life lived in trust by a person who is in a blessed and expectant relationship with God.

"The Lord is my shepherd": that phrase is so distinctive in our ears that we may forget that 'shepherd' was a very common metaphor for God in the ancient Hebrew culture. It provides an interesting counterpoint to the other common metaphor: 'king'. Somehow the Hebrew concept of God and holiness could embrace both the most common and the most exalted roles in society. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all refer to God as a shepherd of the chosen tribe. The 23rd Psalm develops this metaphor to speak to people familiar with perils and comforts of nomadic life. Jesus developed it further in his teaching, taking the mantle of shepherd on himself. This is what a leader looks like, he seems to say: kind, brave, self-sacrificial.

Imagine that winter day, on the Portico of Solomon in Jerusalem. This was one of the old precincts of the Temple, not the new and grand monument being built by Herod. The Portico of Solomon was associated with a much earlier time, when a wise king would preside over a country united in worship and law. And this festival time was not just any old festival: it was Hanukah, a celebration of the cleansing and rededication of the Temple after its desecration by an occupying Syrian army. The Jews (who in the verses just preceding were divided over Jesus' legitimacy) now ask for arbitration from the man himself. "The suspense is killing us. Here we are, during this feast of liberation and victory, in the portico of a king, under the heel of the Romans, looking for rescue, looking for a leader. If you **are** this Messiah, tell us plainly." Who wouldn't want clarity, in that moment?

Jesus does not give the hoped-for, yes-or-no answer. Why am I not surprised: this is the Gospel of John, after all, where all answers tend to be oblique. We want yes or no, and we get, “I have told you, and you do not believe.” In other words, “My **actions** are your answer but you don't want to see what is right in front of your eyes.”

Then Jesus goes on to talk about sheep. His sheep. Belonging to his sheep. He is telling them that he *is* a shepherd – a leader, a king - to those who believe and hear his voice. This is where I really get tangled up. Which is supposed to come first: being a sheep or believing? And maybe more important, believing what? Are the questioning Jews, is my questioning self, outside the flock because we do not have a secret key or password to belonging?

I think that we first have to get away from understanding “belief” as an intellectual exercise. It is more like “trust” as an attitude of the heart. As the Catholic theologian and teacher Richard Rohr writes:

"Faith" is not an affirmation of a creed, an intellectual acceptance of God, or believing certain doctrines to be true or orthodox (although those things might well be good). Yet that seems to be what many Christians have whittled faith down to. Such faith does not usually change your heart or your lifestyle. I'm convinced that much modern atheism is a result of such a heady and really ineffective definition of faith. We defined faith intellectually, so people came up with intellectual arguments against it and then said, "I don't believe in God." Both Jesus' and Paul's notion of faith is much better translated as foundational confidence or trust that God cares about what is happening right now."

No wonder Jesus cannot give a plain answer to the question of who he is. He will not engage in a battle for their minds. He knows that he will not win them over with argumentation or apologetics. What converts the heart and reshapes the world is a slower, but more sacred work of love. This is the “voice” of Jesus heard by those sheep: a gentle and tireless leadership by example.

No, Jesus does not “speak plainly,” perhaps because he honors the complication of human lives and human hearts and the ambiguity of belonging. How can one tell plainly about the beautiful and mysterious ways we show trust and loyalty? Jesus comes to teach about love, forgiveness, and the abundant life of God’s eternal and transformative kingdom. Those are not things that get a yes or no of “belief.” We learn slowly about these things, question as we go, grow into them, and eventually trust them. This is what the Good Shepherd offers with his voice and his leading.

So how does the voice show up for us who are not walking on that winter’s day on Solomon’s Portico, but living in the Upper Valley in 2016? One of the ways it is heard is as a voice of consolation. The words from the book of Revelations promise us that the Shepherd will guide us to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. I am often struck by how often people show up at church for consolation in their times of sorrow, even if they do not come regularly on a Sunday morning. Maybe they are hearing, somehow, echoes of that consoling voice in their valley of the shadow. And I think, that the only reason they are hearing that echo is because of those who have followed the voice of Jesus, in some fashion, down the centuries. And in following, they have acquired some of the vocal characteristics of their Shepherd. In the same way that family members who live together for years end up with similar accents and inflections and mannerisms, people who have joined the family of Jesus may begin to sound a bit

like him. We may, in fact, be the only voice of Jesus that some may hear, even if it is only an echo or a whisper. When we belong, we invite belonging.

But the voice of the Shepherd does not only console. There is comfort and protection in the work of shepherding. But there is also a certain amount of prodding the flock towards places they do not really want to go. Sometimes it is into a shelter, but sometimes there is a persistent prodding to go out and graze in new pastures. Naturally, as sheep, we are a bit confused by this. Our sheep brains have a hard time imagining those new pastures. But there is a larger purpose and a larger world out there.

I listen hard for that voice, and try to distinguish its pitch and tone from other voices that clamor for attention. Tell me plainly, I want to say, exactly where I should go, and where our congregation should go to fulfill our mission and share our energy. This is when and where I am reminded of the trust that is at the core of our relationship with God and each other. That trust is grown in the fertile ground of consolation and collaboration, in shared laughter and in tears, in honest listening and speaking. I believe (or I trust) that if we truly live as the church, the body of Christ in the world, we will hear within our shared life the voice of the Shepherd. We will discern - in the cries of those who struggle with poverty, addiction, incarceration, and violence - another voice, another call, to give as we have been given, and to wipe every tear from their eyes.

And so I pray for understanding of a language that does not always seem plain. When I ask, "Tell us plainly" if Christ is the one we should follow, I pray that I will find the answer in lives lived in trust, in service, and in grace. Amen.