

"The Faithful Good Shepherd"

John 10:22-30

I. Judas, the Hero

Those were dark days in the land of Judea, between the Old and New Testaments. The Babylonians who had destroyed Jerusalem had in turn been destroyed by the Persians; and under the Persians, the Jews had been allowed back to rebuild Jerusalem. Then the Persian Empire had fallen to Alexander the Great, which hadn't changed a whole lot around Judea. But then, Alexander the Great died, and the Seleucids took over Judea; and one of the Seleucids' kings was Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus Epiphanes, or "Antiochus the Enlightened" sought to "enlighten" the Jews. He looked at their religion of one God, of keeping His commands, and of waiting for the Messiah to come; and deciding that this religion was holding them back, he made its practice punishable by death. He turned the temple, God's house, into a place for pagan sacrifices and a brothel. If a believer circumcised his child or rested on the Sabbath, he was to be scourged and flayed alive until death. Terror gripped Judea because of such enlightening.

In time, the family of the Maccabees rose up among the Jews. The first to revolt was Mattathias, but leadership quickly fell to his son, Judas. Judas Maccabaeus led a makeshift army against the Seleucids and gradually defeated them. Eventually, Jerusalem was freed; and the Jews held a great celebration in which they cleansed the temple and dedicated it to the Lord once again. The occasion became a holiday for all of Judea, called the Feast of Dedication; you know it as Hanukkah.

Judas was the hero-the one who saved Judea from the Seleucids and restored the freedom to worship the one true God. He was regarded by many as not just a hero, but perhaps even the Messiah sent by God to deliver His people. There is no doubt that Judas Maccabaeus was a great man, but his messiahship was only temporary, as was the deliverance he brought. Eventually, he died in battle; and he did not rise again. And although he had freed Judea from the Seleucids, it was only a matter of time until the Romans took over. Judas the hero was dead, and the freedom he'd won was snatched away once again.

As this week's Gospel lesson begins, it's Hanukkah in Jerusalem, and Jesus is strolling through the courts of the temple. He is well-known by now. His teaching is repeated, His miracles are recounted again and again, and multitudes follow Him wherever He goes. Lots of eyes are on Him, because Judea is in need of another hero, another deliverer. Could Jesus be the Messiah, the Christ they've been waiting for? He has potential-He can heal and even raise the dead. But at the same time, He lacks the political zeal of a Judas Maccabaeus, and shows no military aspirations against the Romans. Is He the Messiah, or isn't He?

So they gather around Jesus and confront Him: "How long do you keep us in doubt? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Please note Jesus' response, for He says so much as He speaks to them. He says: "25I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. 26"But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. 27"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28"And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. 29"My Father, who has given them to

Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. 30"I and My Father are one."

"I told you, and you did not believe," says Jesus. He points to the works that He does in God the Father's name, works which the Old Testament said would identify the Messiah. He points to the Word that He speaks with His voice, the Word that gives eternal life to His sheep. He tells them that He has such power and authority that no one can snatch His people out of His hand. He tells them that He and the Father are one. So, this man Jesus is also fully God who fulfills the Word, works miracles and gives eternal life to all who hear His voice and believe. Is He the Christ? Without a doubt, yes; and He's made it very clear to them by all that He has said and done. It is not that He is keeping them in doubt, but that they are keeping themselves in doubt by refusing to believe. It's not that He hasn't told them plainly, but that they're looking for a different answer. They want another warrior and conqueror like Judas Maccabaeus; this Jesus doesn't call Himself a warrior, but a shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

But if Jesus has made it so clear-and if it makes so much sense and He's confirmed by the Word, why don't they believe in Him? It is certainly plain to you and me that He is the Christ, so what's the difference? It's because they don't have faith. The Savior stands before them, speaking His faithgiving Word, but they reject His message, they refuse to believe in Him. The Shepherd calls them, but they don't want to be His sheep. To them, Jesus is no good because He's no Judas Maccabaeus. It's true: He's not. He's far superior, as superior as God to man. Judas fought and died, and the freedom he won was eventually lost. Jesus will suffer and die; but then He will rise again from the dead. He gives His people eternal life, and no one will snatch them out of His hand.

II. The Good Shepherd

One of the things that we Christians must acknowledge is that we preach a Savior who is far beyond imagination and intellect. We preach a Prince of Peace who surpasses all human understanding. It is our joy and privilege as Christians to proclaim Jesus Christ. We rejoice, therefore, to declare that the Son of God took on human flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary. We further declare that the holy and righteous Christ, who lived a perfectly sinless life, also suffered and died on the cross for the sins of the world. We also joyfully confess that He rose again from the dead on the third day, that He lives and reigns to all eternity, and that He continues to minister to us with all that we need for this life and eternal life.

We believe this to be true because the Lord declares it true in His Word. However, all of this is beyond man's imagination, intellect and comprehension. A perfect God who becomes flesh is nice in the abstract; but in this world where nothing is flawless, it sounds too perfect. A God who is holy and demands obedience is logical; but the same God offering His Son as the Sacrifice for the sins of the world just does not compute. The human mind wants a god that it can grasp, imagine and fully comprehend. A God who is greater than that is too unbelievable in our rational sort of age.

Now, let's be clear. The problem is not that Jesus is too great to be believed in, too good to be true; people often act that way, but the problem does not lie with the Lord. Neither is the problem with the limited powers of the human mind-we simply aren't created in such a way that we can comprehend all

things, for we are not the Creator. The problem is sin. It's that original sin that blinds us to God's Word. It's that Old Adam in us that has no intention of letting us believe in a God who is greater than we can grasp or control.

The problem does not lie with Jesus and who He is. The problem lies with us; and the problem is sin and lack of faith. It is not merely a matter of misunderstanding, nor is it that the Gospel is just too complex for people. The problem with unbelievers is that sin prevents them from believing.

We must understand this when it comes to evangelism. Our God-given part and privilege in saving the lost is not to argue with people until they accept our logic, because logic doesn't save. It is not to bully people into believing, because grace is a gift, not something forced. It is certainly not to dumb down or soften up the Word of God to make Jesus more attractive to the old sinful nature. No, our God-given part and privilege in saving the lost is faithfulness-faithfully preaching the Word of God and abiding by it. The Word of God is the voice of the Good Shepherd; when sheep hear His voice, they follow Him.

We are called to faithfully, persistently preach the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what evangelism is about-whether it be this Divine Service or your opportunities to speak of Christ with others in your daily life. Faithfulness to the Shepherd's voice is the key, so let us take a moment to warn of several dangers.

- One danger, and a popular one these days, is to reduce Jesus into a graspable Savior. Instead of teaching Him as the virgin-born Son of God, crucified and risen, portray Him as a figure that people can understand.
- Portray Him as only a therapist, who helps people deal with emotional hardship, and make your church all about supporting one another.
- Teach Him as only a defender of the poor and downtrodden, and make your church all about social justice and tolerance.
- Preach Him as only a moral leader who keeps His promises and drives with purpose, and make your church all about being a better person.
- Preach Him as only a healer, and make your church about living a better life in this world.

Emphasize qualities of Jesus that people can understand, even without faith; and deemphasize those attributes of Jesus that can only be believed by faith. Many churches have adopted this tactic, and the pews may fill for a while. But here's the thing: I'm thankful for godly therapists and social workers and moral leaders and healers, all of whom are God's gifts to help us with this life. However, just like Judas Maccabaeus, therapists and social workers and moral leaders and healers are limited, sinful and eventually die. If people "believe" in Jesus only as a help for this life, they have no hope for eternal life. Woe to the one who reduces Jesus into a sensible Savior, and thus fails to preach His salvation.

But those who preach Jesus according to the Word face other temptations: There is always the danger that, even as we preach the Word of God, we allow our sinful selves to get in the way of the message. On the one hand, there is always the temptation to add gimmicks in order to make the proclamation more exciting; on the other hand, there's always the danger of sounding so lackluster that we sound completely bored with the message of Christ crucified and risen again. This is, by the way, where the

liturgy is an invaluable help, for each week it sets before us the Word of God to sing and keeps us from relying on our own novelties in worship.

Another danger to evangelism is frustration. We preach the Word, and people don't believe. You work up the courage to witness to someone, and they reject what you have to say. There must be something wrong with us, right? Well, maybe. Our Old Adam is always at work to obscure that message, and there's always the possibility that some sort of weakness on our part is obscuring the message. When I've visited churches, I've had members greet me and visit with me by telling me everything they don't like about the congregation or the church's teachings! Such conversations tend to drive visitors away, and no wonder. But then again, when people reject the Gospel, maybe it's not that we've done something wrong. As Christians, we accept the truth-as we see it in this Gospel lesson-that no matter how clearly salvation in Christ is proclaimed, many will simply refuse to believe. This happened when Jesus Himself proclaimed His Word, and we should expect no better reaction. But how should we respond? As a church and as individuals, you and I will be tempted to alter the message to make it more palatable, or else we will be tempted to stop sharing it. But faith comes by the Shepherd's voice, through His Word. If we depart from the Word or fail to proclaim it, then no one will hear it and believe.

Hear the words of Jesus, your Good Shepherd: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." As Christians, then, our part in evangelism is faithfulness: Faithfully preserving the Word of God in its truth and purity, and faithfully proclaiming that Word to all who will hear.

We must address one more thing in this sermon, lest I prove less than faithful. The Good Shepherd's voice is not just comfort and salvation for people out there. He is your comfort and salvation, too. Sometimes, a church becomes so mission-minded that as it seeks to evangelize others, it fails to evangelize itself. If the sermon and worship service are designed primarily for visitors, then they will not speak so much to the sheep who are already in the fold. It is not my intention to neglect the sheep who are in the fold in order to reach out to those who are not yet.

Because this is true: Gathered here as the people of God, you are in need of His grace and presence, too. The joyful truth that God has made you His own in Christ does not mean that you do not face all sorts of trial and difficulty. You may be plagued with guilt. You may be frustrated with where your life seems headed. You may face unfair oppression on the job. You may be sick. You may be dying. And with such troubles, you don't need a Judas Maccabaeus to set you free for only a little while. In this place, you don't need to hear of a moral example or a counselor or a crusader for social justice. You need a Savior who actually saves for eternity.

So as we have the privilege of proclaiming the Jesus Christ to others, so I proclaim Him to you. He is your Good Shepherd, who has laid down His life on the cross to redeem you, and who has taken up His life again for you. He has suffered the guilt of your sin, and so He declares you forgiven. He preserves you despite the plots of others and the setbacks, for He has promised faithfully to deliver you to heaven. He has borne your infirmities to the cross so that He might deliver you from illness. And where no one else can deliver you from death, He declares to you, His sheep, "I give you eternal life, and you will never perish; neither shall anyone snatch you out of My hand." The promise is sure, for your Good Shepherd is no less than the risen Son of God who speaks to you today. Therefore, we rejoice this day to hear the Word of our Shepherd, for by that Word He gives us faith to believe in Him.

We give thanks for the privilege of proclaiming His Word to others, for by that Word He freely gives faith so that they might believe.

And by that faith He gives, He assures you that no one will snatch you out of His hand.....because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen