Tell Us *Plainly*

A Meditation on John 10: 22 – 30

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church May 12, 2019

My father was a newspaper man long before he went into the advertising field. He preferred direct answers to his questions, none of this background foolishness for him. Just answer the question. Dinner conversations could be unbelievably frustrating. He would ask a question, I would respond *with a story*, only to be interrupted with a “that’s not what I asked.” I have no idea how my parents decided to tie the knot, but I have imagined my father proposing to my mother with a simple “Mimi, will you marry me?” (Although to be fair it was probably preceded by one of the numerous – sentimental - poems he knew by heart.) “I love you, Bill!” I can hear her say. “That’s not what I asked!” I hear him reply. “It’s a yes or no question,” he says with a twinkle.

My father would have appreciated the Jewish leaders’ desire for a simple, straightforward answer to a simple, straightforward question. “Tell us plainly who you are,” they say to Jesus. They stop him as he is wandering through the colonnade of Solomon’s porch, a portion of the Temple in Jerusalem. He is there during the Feast of Dedication, what we would know as Hanukah. “How long will you leave us doubting?” they say to him. “Don’t try our patience!” If you are the Christ, the Messiah, then tell us now.” This isn’t a lighthearted question. The answer to this question *is everything.* This circle of men is bold enough to ask the question that all the Jewish leaders have been debating since Jesus’ first appearance.

They don’t want figures of speech or stories. They want the answer. One word. From him. Prophets have come and gone, but no one has lived into the promises of the messiah. Now, here is this man, this Jesus. Word has begun to spread of his ability to perform miracles, but equally disturbing - or curious – is his reputation as a troublemaker. On a previous trip to the temple, during the Passover Festival, Jesus had taken a whip and purged the money changers from the temple. In John’s gospel this event takes place *at the beginning* of Jesus’ ministry, rather than the end, where the other writers place it. Flipping tables, tossing coins and releasing overpriced doves! This justice seeking moment is a defining moment. In John’s Gospel, this statement is foundational, and it looks and feels like a messiah moment.

Have these men been watching him? Waiting to see if he will do the same thing again? Have they been hoping for other signs? The CEB, which we read, has the questioners saying, “how long will you test our patience?” That sounds like parents scolding a child, doesn’t it? But other translations would lead us to believe that there was longing in their voices. The NRSV: “How long will you keep us in suspense?” brings a very different impression. When we are “kept in suspense” we are often hoping, possibly hoping against hope, for good news, for miraculous news. If we dig a little deeper we would find that, “Don’t keep our *souls* in suspense,” might be a more accurate translation.[[1]](#endnote-1) Their question does not originate in their heads, but in their very souls. These hungry souls are holding their breath, and they can’t hold it much longer.

The messiah is the promised one for whom they have been waiting. The messiah is the one for whom their parents waited and watched. The messiah is the one for whom their grandparents and great-grandparents waited and watched, never giving up hope.

They circle around Jesus, look into his face and ask:

*Are you the anointed one?
Are you the messiah?*

*Are you the Christ?*

It is difficult for us, as followers of Jesus, to separate the original meaning of messiah from our appropriation of that word. In Jewish thought and belief, the messiah is not expected to be a savior from sins (a name we have given to Jesus), but a liberator, a political leader, a restorer of Israel. As deeply as we cherish the life of one who embodies forgiveness and reconciliation for the world, so do our Jewish sisters and brothers cherish the hope of one who will come to set things right. Who would not long for that?

Nancy Rockwell, on her blog “Bite in the Apple” describes their encounter like this:

“Are you the Messiah or not??!! The Pharisees ask him urgently, daringly. The whole Messianic tradition is considered dangerous by the Herods, and by the Roman Governors. It’s a Black-Lives-Matter kind of prayer-group cum political movement. Revolutionary language is spoken here. For the Pharisees to raise this question in public is a risk. And they do so with yearning.

There is an agenda for the Jewish Messiah, and everyone knows it: the Messiah will become king…[the messiah] will rule with justice for the poor and weak, [and] restore right worship…” Those who ask [Jesus if he is the messiah] are longing for a sea change in the order of the world they know. An Apocalyptic battle and Victory.” [[2]](#endnote-2)

And we can certainly echo, “Amen” to that yearning.

“Jesus, are you the anointed one? *Yes or no*?”

But it is never that simple with Jesus. He doesn’t answer directly; he refers them back to what they have heard and seen. They’ve seen someone dare to challenge the oppressive money changing system for temple sacrifices. People in power had turned a blind eye to this. People in power had been benefiting from this. Jesus was the one to name it. To cause a scene about it. But it was only a few tables, not an entire regime. *Are you the messiah?*

He had healed people on the Sabbath: a man who was paralyzed and later a man who had been born blind. It was one thing to tell someone to get up and walk on the Sabbath, but to carry their mat? It’s one thing for Jesus to choose to break Sabbath but to instruct others to do so? For the man who was born blind, Jesus spit into the dirt, made mud and smeared it on the man’s eyes. When the man washed, he could see! Working on the Sabbath? *How could you be the anointed one?*

Jesus’ life was problematic from so many angles. Drawing attention to the corruption at the temple? That’s good unless you are one of the people profiting from that corruption. Healing on the Sabbath? That’s good, unless you are one of those who fear Jesus’ understanding of Sabbath. They looked to his actions: the healings, the feedings, the teachings, and they still couldn’t find the decisive answer to their question.

Seeing their struggle, Jesus offers them a different image, that of a shepherd. They know this image. They know the words of the Shepherd’s Psalm. A shepherd is a defender, a protector, a provider. Anyone could be a shepherd. Shepherds are not special. Messiahs don’t typically come in the form of shepherds. Shepherds do not receive the oil of anointing. It is not poured over their heads, but shepherds anoint, pouring oil over the wounds of the sheep in their care. Shepherds aren’t laboring for justice, but they are putting their lives on the line for their foolish little sheep. It is a relationship. The sheep know the sound of the shepherd’s voice, and trust the shepherd with their lives.

Things *might* have been okay if Jesus had stopped there, but Jesus went on to say that he was one with God. At that point they cried “blasphemy” and started gathering stones so they could kill him. They weren’t looking for God that day. They were looking for God’s messiah.

Sometimes it’s a good idea to stop looking for what you *think you need*

when what you do need is right in front of you.

They wanted a messiah. They got a shepherd.

Don’t you love it when you ask a “deep” question and parents or friends or therapists turn it back on you? “How would *you* answer that question?” they say. Jesus turned their question back to them. He was not the messiah that they had learned about through their study of Torah. That answer was clearly, “no.” But could they become a part of messiah work? Could they imagine, having witnessed Jesus turn a few tables, that they could flip a few themselves? Having witnessed Jesus bend some rules, could they suggest a little revision in those places where rules were causing more pain than healing?

Could they welcome a shepherd even while they waited for a messiah? Could they possibly imagine a messiah in shepherd’s clothing, one who comes to unsettle rather than praise, rewrite rather than turn a deaf ear, anoint rather than to be anointed?

What an amazing God we serve. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/04/a-winters-story.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/what-do-you-think-the-messiah-should-be-doing/>

Additional sources consulted: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/my-holy-envy-other-faith-traditions>, Feasting on the Word Lectionary Commentary. Connections Lectionary Commentary [↑](#endnote-ref-2)