

<Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23:1-6; John 10:22-30>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

I once got lost at church in plain sight. Or perhaps, I shouldn't say that I got lost; it would be more accurate to say that I wandered off. But not idly. Rather, I was following someone, but not in a meandering or being enticed away kind of manner. Let me back up.

Both my parents sang in the choir at church while I was growing up; in fact, they still do. But that frequently meant that I was brought to church on Thursday evenings during choir rehearsal to entertain myself, or to be bored and pester them. Being younger, I was also shorter, and largely came up to the waist of my parents and all the other adults at church and in the choir. My dad sang as a tenor, and as it happens, Ken Taft also sang as a tenor. Ken was also about my dad's height, and wore glasses, and was balding on the top of his head. Like my dad.

When you're a child and not really paying attention to your surroundings, it's amazing how easy it can be, from the height of someone's waist, to confuse one balding, bespectacled man for another. So it happened, one night after choir rehearsal, that I saw “my dad” leaving, and as I was getting a ride home with him, I followed him out. Except that it wasn't my dad; it was Ken Taft. And I followed him out of church, without a word, because in him I saw who I understood to be my dad.

Thankfully, that was an honest mix-up and easily rectified; though I do remember Ken being very confused as to why I was following him...

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

In John's gospel, Jesus has performed many miracles and major signs, showcasing his divinity and underscoring the proclamation of who he is and what he has come to see realized. Notably, in the chapter and verses leading up to our reading this morning, he has healed the man born blind and, when questioned about it, declared that he has come to bring life, and bring it abundantly.

But still, as we see from this morning's reading, “the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’” We should note that “the Jews” often connotes the religious leaders of the day, who we know were not always accepting of Jesus' proclamations and teachings. But they have to come to him again, during what we more frequently know to be Hanukkah - celebrating the rededication of the Temple of God - asking, ‘are you the Messiah?’

Our English translations give us the impression that the people are asking idly and merely want Jesus to be more plain and direct. In the biblical languages, however, the verb and tense used conveys a much stronger emotion; these people are irritated and annoyed that Jesus has not come right out with it, and they want to know! Especially now, during Hanukkah and the celebration; it is a time when the people are remembering the heroes of their faith, the big names and the stories that went with those names - Elijah and Moses and David and Solomon and all the rest. They are remembering these names, and desiring to see the fulfillment of prophesy and hope realized, and they want to know whether Jesus is or is not the Messiah, a reality which Jesus, maddeningly, has not answered outright.

Do you realize that, in John's gospel, Jesus does not once come right out and claim Messiah-ship?

Jesus does say a lot of things about himself in John's gospel, though. He says that he is the good shepherd. He says that he is the gate to the sheepfold. He says that he is the true vine and the bread of life, as well as the light of the world. But he never names himself as Messiah, and it's driving the people, particularly the religious leaders, batty.

But Jesus does offer them something in response to the verbal pulling-out-of-hair that you can imagine: he tells them, plainly, that he and the Father are one.

This is both an answer to what they are asking, and it is more than an answer. They want Jesus to be the Messiah, but “he is more than what they understand the Messiah to be, and those who understand this truth do so because they listen to him, they live with him, and know him and are known by him” (Chelsey Harmon, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*).

The religious leaders want a plain and simple declaration; Jesus responds by inviting them to look at what he is doing, and how the people are receiving it. He points them not to an official proclamation, but to a litany of teachings, miracles, healings, and experiences, ordinary and extraordinary, which the people are recognizing and living by.

Jesus had been making a proclamation all along, just not in the way certain people were looking for one. He was known not by his verbal proclamation, but by his actions and lived-out understanding of the very-present Kingdom of God. His very life and living were the testimony of who he is, and what he has come to see realized.

As it turns out, he is not the only one whose quality of living is the very proclamation of their life.

There is an aspect of funerals that I find to be very affirming and life-giving. It would be strange to say that I like funerals, but having done more than I care to count, I can say that I have come to appreciate them. And more than that, I appreciate that, on such occasions, people tend to gravitate toward and lift up the best stories of a person.

Have you ever noticed this? Not that it never happens, but it is a rare occasion when a person’s funeral is comprised of stories of how horrible they were. Rather, we tell the good stories; we remember and uplift the best of who a person was.

This is precisely what is happening at Tabitha’s wake, as Peter is called to come visit. As he arrives and enters the house, he is met by a scene that is equal parts grief and gratitude. “All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.” The people are grieving, but they are also showcasing the very works that make up the tangible testimony of her life. And how often do we do much the same at funerals today? We remember a person by the tangible and intangible gifts and works which they left.

In this case, Dorcas was an amazing woman who offered much to the community. From our gospel reading, during the Festival of Dedication, the heroes of faith were remembered and lifted up once again. Our Bible is filled with the stories of amazing and remarkable people who offered great, unparalleled gifts. But what about the rest of us? What about the rest of the people of faith who may never raise someone from the dead or convert an entire nation or travel the world in ministry and mission?

Their works, the testimony of these every-day saints, of us, is just as vibrant and meaningful.

In seminary, my class was once given the task of writing our future obituary. It was an exercise meant to evoke within us the kinds of qualities and actions we imagined that we wanted to be remembered by. Looking at such qualities in a made-up future obituary, then, helped us to see what we value and want to give our energy to, here and now. What would you want your obituary to say, and how will you rededicate yourself to living into those values today?

Even now, in this continuing Easter season, we are invited to follow Christ and his calling. Our testimony stands before us, ready to be written and updated, each and every day. We follow Jesus, for in Him we see the One who is like a parent, like a guide and guardian. We hear Jesus’ voice, and we are invited again to proclaim the good news of the gospel, the love and healing of the Kingdom of God. How will we respond? Whatever your answer may be, may it be one of faith and thanksgiving for a life well-lived. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*