

# Scripture Comments

John 10.22-42

Suspense

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The setting for this story is the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah. This feast is a celebration instituted by Judas Maccabaeus to commemorate the purification of the Temple (164 BC) from the pollutions of Antiochus Epiphanes. Hanukkah is celebrated at the winter solstice. Solomon's Porch is the public arcade at the south end of the Temple compound. Within the Gospel According to John we find Jesus' signs, speeches and controversies presented as occurring on feast days: Sabbath, Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. In John's theology, Jesus fulfills and brings to an end Judaism and all of its festivals and traditions. The followers of Jesus celebrate this understanding of what he is doing. However, there is opposition to Jesus from those who hold these traditions dear.

The story picks up with the continuing debate over the identity of Jesus. We have heard earlier in John the "messianic secret." This secret is what the scholars label as the reluctance of Jesus to clearly identify himself as the messiah. The author of this Gospel transliterates the Hebrew word *messias* twice and explains to his non-Jewish readers that this word is the equivalent of *christos*, "the anointed" (1.41; 4.25, 29).

The question put to Jesus reminds us of questions from Luke (22.67) and Mark (14.53-65). The "Jews," who pose the question, give the impression of impatience or vexation. They want an end to the confusion about who Jesus is. The question they ask is a play on words with what Jesus has previously said to them. Jesus said, "no one takes away my life, or soul." They use the same terms, "How long will you take our soul?" It is an idiom for holding people in breathless suspense. I have said before in my comments on John that the term "the Jews" does not mean all Jews. It can either mean a very specific group of Jews who were in conflict with Jesus or it can symbolically represent all of those in the world who do not believe that Jesus is the messiah. When we read these texts from John today, we realize that "the Jews" can refer to those inside and outside of the church. We can hold customs, places, traditions and rituals so firmly that we forget the total adequacy of the Christ.

Jesus does not give a direct answer to the question asked him for two reasons. The questioners would not believe him even if he told them (vv. 25-26). They have seen the works or signs that Jesus has performed and they do not believe. To use the imagery of this text: they do not believe, not because Jesus is not a shepherd, but because they are not sheep. The second reason that Jesus does not answer them plainly that he is the Christ, is because that is an inadequate title to describe who he is. Truly Jesus is the Messiah, but the term has become so shaped by expectations and wishes that it is not possible to say "yes" to the question without creating false hopes. When an expectation is distorted, the fulfillment of that expectation gets distorted. The first task of the Messiah is to get the people to stop looking for a messiah.

Jesus' reply reminds us that we do not know who he is because he does not measure up to some preconceived notion of how a divine figure ought to act. Jesus eludes the prior categories and redefines the cherished titles from Israel's past (Messiah, Son of man, Son of God). Jesus transcends and transforms all of the titles and all of our expectations. Another problem with our perception of Jesus is that we do not decide he is the Messiah merely as a matter of processing data. Knowing the Messiah has to do with a reorientation; a change of location from one community to another, a movement from one fold to another.

Reorientation and relocation are not all that is involved. Promises of security and protection are made. Earlier in this chapter believers are called sheep (10.1-18) and they cannot be separated from the care of the shepherd. There are threats from bandits, thieves and wolves (10.8-10, 11-12). The protection comes at the cost of the shepherd's life.

The thoughts expressed in this text concerning the shepherd and the sheep seem to be circular. Looking at John's theology from an overview of the entire Gospel, we understand that faith is a complex theme. There is one consistent theme regarding faith: for those who stand back, arms folded, waiting to be convinced, final proof is never enough. Those who enter the flock hear the shepherd's voice. Clearly, for John, Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus' ministry is not contingent on human acts, words or requests. The works or signs of Jesus testify to who he is because they are the works of the Father. Jesus' hand protecting the sheep is no less the hand of the Father.

John's theology is a radical presentation of grace: all is of God, not of our choosing. We must place alongside this radical grace that whoever believes has eternal life (3.16-17).

#### References:

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