

Easter 4C. April 17, 2016. John 10: 22-30.

This Sunday is frequently called Good Shepherd Sunday. And indeed, the lectionary--the calendar that determines which bible texts we read each week--stacks up as many sheep and shepherd images as it can. This year we have the 23rd psalm, where the Lord is our shepherd; this story from Revelation that involves a bunch of people standing in front of a divine Lamb; and the story from John in which Jesus makes certain promises about the safety of his flock. And as we're buried under all this lamb and sheep stuff, it's easy to miss a particular line that is so profoundly human.

Jesus' ministry has been public for a bit of time now, word about him has spread. Rumors fly around Israel about this great prophet from the middle of nowhere who just might be the promised messiah. And so he's walking around Jerusalem and the crowd gathers around and asks "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly!" Tell us plainly. Give it to us straight. We're asking a yes or no question--please answer in kind. No more riddles, no more guessing, nor more ambiguity, no more suspense.

Now before we get into Jesus' answer, I just want to stay with this question for a few minutes, because the way they ask it rings so true to me. First, these are obviously faithful people. When they hear that there's a great prophet in town, they go to see what's up. And even more than that, they are looking for the fulfillment of God's promises. They're in suspense: could this be the messiah? The one sent by God to save us? These aren't the folks who oppose Jesus, who feel threatened by him, who get in his way. These are would-be disciples, people who want to believe but first, can they just get a straight answer out of the guy? Who are you? Are you the fulfillment of our hopes? Just tell us plainly.

If you don't recognize this thirst for a straight answer in response to a complicated question, then you are really a very different kind of person than I am. When faced with profound complexity, it is deeply human to thirst for certainty, for surety, for a one-word answer that we can easily understand and that will cut right through the complications and ambiguities and put us back on firm ground. This isn't just a religious thirst. We see it constantly during this political season. The soundbite goes, so and so voted against this bill that would have helped the economy; when actually the person opposed it because there was a rider in the bill that advocated killing baby bunny rabbits. A simple interpretation of what is actually a very complex situation. But we also feel it in the most personal aspects of our lives. Will this job make me happy? Is my marriage healthy? Is this decision good for my child? Should we continue medical treatment?

We desperately want an easy answer to our difficult questions, but the problem is that the easy answers tend to be wrong. Easy answers in response to complicated situations is the methodology for producing fundamentalism--in religion, in politics, in management strategies, in personal taste. Jesus could have answered this question plainly. If we were forced into a one-word answer to this question, Christian faith would answer "yes." But while that simple "yes" does say something that Christian faith believes about Jesus, it doesn't actually tell us that much about who Jesus is or what it means in our lives for Jesus to be the messiah. Because while we believe that Jesus is the messiah, the Christ, what that means is something very different from his contemporaries expected—and probably means something rather different from what we often expect, as well.

Jesus doesn't answer plainly because the yes or no answer doesn't actually do much to move us forward in Christian life. Easy answers are more likely to cause future problems for us than they are to help us grow closer to God. Instead, Jesus points his interlocutors to the work

that he has been doing and talks about his care for his “sheep.” I think this means that we are called to resist the easy answers, the lazy certainties that will surely break down. We can’t dispense with the questions about the core of life so easily. Instead, we have to carry these questions with us as we watch for God’s work in the world.

This refusal of easy answers isn’t some fuzzy, wishy-washy unwillingness to take a stand. It is a rigorous insistence on taking the complexities of our lives seriously. It is an unwavering willingness to see ambiguity as ambiguous—and to look even there for the works that Jesus is doing.

I grew up a fundamentalist, full of easy answers. And that worked very well for a while. As long as life is easy, easy answers will work for us. But when the questions get harder—as they always do eventually—those easy answers start to fracture, along with the life that was built on them. And if we haven’t learned how to see God’s work in the midst of ambiguity, if we think that life is always black and white, then when we find ourselves in a grey world, we’ll have no idea how to see the ways in which God is still working for our salvation, even in ambiguity, even in ways that are difficult to articulate, that can’t be boiled down to a soundbite.

Jesus refuses to answer plainly, refuses to give an easy answer. Instead, he instructs the folks to look at the work that he is doing in the world. If you want to know who Jesus is, then the only way to find out is to pay attention, to try to follow him, to risk relationship. This is a much harder task than just receiving an answer and either believing it or not believing it. But there is also profound gentleness here—an assurance of Jesus’ care for his flock. We might question why some people seem to be in and some people seem to be out of that flock, but from what else we know about Jesus and God, I think it’s more profitable, if more difficult, to trust. To relinquish our insistence on answers and to try trust, to try relationship.

We are surrounded by hard questions and we all thirst for easy answers. We are called to resist those easy certainties and to look for God’s work in the mixed up, complicated, grey world. In short, our trust is in a person, rather than an answer. It’s much scarier! And finally, much more rewarding. Amen.