

Sermon: **Beyond Words**

Text: John 10:22-30

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**INTRODUCTION TO THE SERMON:**

Let me take a few minutes to set our lesson in its biblical and historical context. In the larger context, it falls into a long section of confusion and conjecture about to Jesus' true identity and mission. (Chapters 5-10) Included in this is an ongoing controversy between Jesus and some of the religious leadership.

In the first part of this chapter 10, Jesus spoke of his own identity and mission in terms of the good shepherd. In the minds of his audience this would have clear illusion to the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 34) speaking against the many false shepherds who come with false motives and harm the flock and scatter the sheep. But Ezekiel prophesies that God himself will come as the Good shepherd and will seek out his sheep and will feed them and care for them. Jesus has further described this true shepherd. He says that the good shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out to pasture. He goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger because they do not know the voice of strangers.

Then Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd, saying, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I lay down my life for the sheep and I have the power to take it up again".

Now the religious leaders of the temple weren't quite sure of what to make of this. John tells us "They were divided because of these words." They found these words confusing. Some said, "He has a demon. He's out of his mind. He's crazy. Why listen to him?" But others countered, "Yes, but his words don't sound like what a demon would say, and besides, can a demon open the eyes of the blinds?" They all had just witnessed Jesus restoring the sight of a man blind from birth.

So they are divided over the words of Jesus. His talk was confusing to them and had been a contentious subject among them.

The immediate setting of our lesson is the Feast of Dedication, now called Hanukkah. It was an occasion of tremendous significance to the Jewish people. It recalled the cleansing and rededication of the temple by the hero Judas Maccabeus after it had been desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes. The Feast of Dedication was in celebration of this past event but it also had come to incite a heightened anticipation for the coming of a final deliverer of God's people, ushering in a new age of blessing.

Our lesson opens with Jesus walking in the temple. The temple leaders, who are so divided over who he really is and who have been arguing among themselves, surrounded Jesus. They literally encircled him and threw down the gauntlet.

**READING:** John 13:22-30

**SERMON:**

"OK Jesus, let's cut the suspense! If you are the Messiah, just tell us plainly. Give it to us straight. Yes or no."

That sounds good to me, how about you? We like straight talk, don't we? We don't care much for ambiguity and nuance, which can be confusing and evasive. Straight talk appeals to us. It suggests a kind of clarity and certainty. It makes us feel sure about something.

Advertisers know this about us. They put their pitch up front in bold print. They know we aren't inclined to read the small print. But, as they say, the devil is in the details. That loud and exciting offer that comes to us over the radio fades out with a list of exceptions and voids spoken in a low, monotonous, fast-moving gibberish that is indecipherable. But we've heard and we remember the plain talk.

Politicians often campaign with short clipped slogans... sound bites... more catchy and cute than they are substantive or informing. But they're memorable and they work.

Television interviews of politicians and pop celebrities are loaded with pointed and provocative questions meant to put one on the spot. They are geared more for antagonistic debate than clarity and understanding.

This is all because we like it this way. We call for it. "Give it to us straight, in black and white, yes or no."

However, plain talk about something that is complex by its very nature, is often too simple and can be very misleading. A fast answer can conceal an awful lot. A too-short response can gloss over very important implications and possibilities.

It's when someone says, "I don't care what anybody says; all I know is...." That's just the problem. That's all they know and that's all they are willing to know. Yet this simplistic response gives one such a satisfying feeling of confidence and certitude. He's sure he's right!

Remember when Jesus was discussing with his disciples the varied popular opinions and conjectures and projections as to who he really was. Some thought he was Elijah, others, John the Baptist and others, one in a succession of prophets. Then Jesus personalized the discussion, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter responds quickly and boldly, "You are the Messiah."

He nailed it. He spoke the truth plainly in a straightforward declaration. It's a headline; a great slogan; a bumper sticker.

Jesus said, "You're absolutely right, Peter. Now have you read the rest; the small print? Have you considered the real-life implications of what you just spoke so decisively?" The scripture says, "He began to teach them". Do you recognize what this means for the Messiah? He must suffer and be killed and rise again. Have you considered what this will mean for anyone who follows him. It demands denying yourself, taking up your own cross and following after Christ.

Peter didn't much like the details. He just wanted to wave a banner and make a declaration and enjoy the satisfying feeling of confidence and certitude.

"OK Jesus", they say in our lesson. "Let's cut the suspense. Our very living and reputations are in suspension here, and everything seems unclear and evasive. It's time for you to declare yourself here in the open. Are you the Messiah? Tell us plainly. Tell us straight. Yes or no. Speak it out. Don't tell us another parable. Don't preach us a sermon. Don't use vague illusions like light, or bread, or shepherds and sheep. Just tell us plainly. Are you the Messiah?"

They were looking for a simple decisive word so they could either agree with Jesus or would have some unquestionable reason to reject him. "Let's get it nailed down. Tell us plainly."

Well, Jesus is not about to tell them plainly... that is, as they want to hear it in a yes-or-no fashion. Certainly he's not going to say "No, I am not the Messiah." But in this case a simple "yes" won't do. That would have been terribly misleading because of their misunderstanding of his messiahship. They were hoping for a messiah the likes of Judas Maccabeus... a great military and political hero. Their expectations were distorted. They had some fixed ideas in their thinking and they were trying to force Jesus to declare himself in their terms. In this case it would have been impossible for Jesus to give a straightforward yes-or-no answer to a question so loaded with false assumption. It would have been terribly misleading and might have sent them off on a disastrous course.

So Jesus again begins to teach them, explaining a little more about his true messiahship. He leads them beyond mere words... the words that confuse and divide them. He leads them beyond simple right-or-wrong ideas about his messiahship, to a vital relationship with the Living Christ.

All his words about shepherds and sheep were not vague illusions or sentimental images, but were words portraying the relationship of Jesus to his followers as the good

shepherd to the sheep. He personalizes his messiahship in terms of authentic experience of the Living Christ in real relationship, something beyond our calculated understanding and our ability to define and describe in plain talk.

You ask, Jesus says, if I'm the Messiah. I have told you through my works. I have shown you again and again. My words and works are the words and works of God. But you are not recognizing me. You analyze me to death but you do not recognize me. You are not hearing me. You don't believe me because you do not know me as one of my sheep.

My sheep hear me. They recognize my voice. They follow me and are one with me as I am one in purpose with the Father.

The word "to know" here means to recognize and to know somebody. It's that kind of knowledge implied when one says, "I really know ol' Murphy, and I know I can trust him."

Last week I enjoyed some time with my daughter's family. My granddaughter, Lindsey, not yet a year old, knows her mother's voice. Several times when I was holding her, her mommy entered the room and said something. Immediately Lindsey's head turned toward her mother, arching her back and stiffening away from me, and reaching out to her mother.

This is not calculus. She doesn't work her little mind through a series of logical syllogisms to come up with a sort of maternal ideology to inform her conclusions and decisions. It's an innate draw to that unique voice and to the one who feeds and nurtures her; that one in whom she finds security and safety. When she falls backward and bumps her head on the coffee table instinctively its mommy's voice, mommy's arms and mommy's embrace and cuddle that she responds to. This is her refuge and satisfaction and peace and hope.

This is not theory, based on calculations, conjectures or proposals. It's not about words and plain truth statements. It's the reality of a relationship experience, recognized and known. It's life.

I can't explain all this, but I hope it helps us understand that the identity and significance of Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord will not be reduced to a title or a tag, a slogan or a flag. It can only be experienced in relationship... a relationship of belonging.

The issue here is not about truth statements set forth in succinct propositional form. The question is not, "Do you ascribe to that statement or position", or "What do you think of that idea? Do you believe that?"

Rather, Jesus is asking, "Do you believe me? Are you hearing me? Do you recognize me? Do you know my voice? Do you know me? Can you trust me enough to come my way? Are you following me?"

The call of Jesus Christ always brings us into new and growing relationship with him. It's a walk, a conversation, a life. We recognize him. We know his voice. We belong to him.

And that relationship leads us to a new lifestyle. We follow him.

Hearing and following are the essence of believing and belonging.

Jesus, our good shepherd says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they are secure in me forever.

Amen.